

@ Work: Gold Coast Yachts

By Don Buchanan

Twenty-one years and about 73 catamarans ago, Richard Difede and Roger Hatfield were tinkering with their own boats. They had thought about building a boat to do inter-island travel, but then Heinz Punzenberger approached them. The boat Heinz had brought from England and was using for Buck Island tours was 20 years old. He wanted a new boat. Difede and Hatfield began building Teroro II for him, and Gold Coast Yachts was born.

Hatfield designed the boat that has become the standard for passenger tour boats around the world. Difede said the design "allows the passengers the experience of being on a moderate sized catamaran without the danger or discomfort sometimes associated with them." The boats are designed so passengers don't come in contact with the rigging or sails.

Hatfield says that back in the beginning, "We both liked boats and had a desire to make a career out of it." Asked how soon the company became successful, he laughed, "This is boat building, we are still working on being successful."

Difede spoke about some of the challenges facing the company. Gold Coast builds about four boats per year. Island Dreamer, a boat finished this March, sailed out of Salt River for Jamaica having been sold for \$680,000. The problem is that there is a 12-boat backlog. Six boats are currently under contract, and customers are lined up for another six.

The company has been adding some new technological processes which Difede says may bump output up to five or six boats a year. He says that won't be improved on unless the company can relocate to a larger space than the one at Salt River Marina.

Some uncertainty surrounds the company because it is an Economic Development Commission beneficiary. Gold Coast has been in the program for 18 years and appears to be doing what the program promotes by providing 27 islanders with skilled, well-paying jobs. However, the law is written so a company's benefits cannot go beyond 20 years.

Difede says, "We need those benefits because we are earning dollars in a Euro economy." He said the company is faced with competition from New Zealand and other places where labor and transportation costs are cheaper.

But both Hatfield and Difede exhibited confidence in the company as they took a hands-on role getting Island Dreamer ready for her trip to Jamaica, and answered questions from workers about the boat currently under construction.

Both men are active in the community. Difede plays guitar in the worship group at St. Croix Christian Church, and performed at this year's inter-faith Good Friday service at the Sunny Isles Amphitheater.

Hatfield is into running, swimming and biking. He participates in the island triathlons. He doesn't do as much boating as he once did, but says he takes each new Gold Coast boat out for sea trials. "I am captain four times a year, that is enough boating for me now." He admits that his threshold for seasickness is low, and that Gold Coast boats are designed so he doesn't cross that threshold. The boat-builders' biggest customer is a company servicing the Hyatt Regency Hotels. It has bought nine Gold Coast catamarans. Three of those boats are in Aruba.

In addition to building Teroro II for Punzenberger, Gold Coast also built Renegade, which Big Beard uses to take guests to Buck Island. Heavenly Days out of St. Thomas, and Island Spirit out of St. John are also Gold Coast boats.

When asked if Gold Coast might relocate somewhere other than St. Croix, Difede said, "No, we are all part of St. Croix."

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