

Local

St. Thomas-St. Croix ferry hits the water at Salt River

✎ By STEPHEN CHESLIK Daily News Staff

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Warren
Mosler

Five years after ferry service between St. Thomas and St. Croix came to an abrupt end with the grounding of the Royal Miss Belmar, a new 103-foot, 50-passenger ferry has taken its first dip in the water.

While the St. Croix-built ferry QE IV got its four hulls wet for the first time Tuesday, it will be several more months before the one-of-a-kind tandem catamaran is ready to carry passengers between the Charlotte Amalie waterfront on St. Thomas and Gallows Bay on St. Croix, according to Gold Coast Yachts Vice President Jeff Bisson.

There were some tense moments Tuesday when the crew tried to put the QE IV into the water at Salt River.

A hose on one of the cranes failed and needed to be replaced, which delayed the operation for a couple hours, but QE IV hit the water about 1:30 p.m.

The innovative design is the brainchild of St. Croix resident Warren Mosler.

Best known as a hedge-fund founder and economist, the former V.I. gubernatorial candidate and boutique sports car manufacturer is building the ferry without any government support.

“Warren’s whole venture is based on ride quality, not speed,” Bisson said. “Ride quality and fuel efficiency.”

While seasickness has long been a complaint of passengers traveling between the islands, the ferry’s unique design is expected to make the ride much easier for queasy passengers.

“Two years ago I built a 24-foot version with seven foot hulls,” Mosler said.

“And, we’ve been driving it around for two years. Anybody who claims they get seasick we put them on it.”

“Where when you come to a wave in a normal boat, the whole boat lifts over the wave including the middle section. With this boat, the front section lifts a little bit, but goes back down because there is a space between the two hulls,” Mosler said.

“Nobody ever gets sick.”

“It won’t heave you up in the air, Mosler said. “It will be like riding a bus that is a 100 feet long — like over a sand dune if it had soft tires.”

While the initial concept was tested with two dinghies linked with a spare mast, Gold Coast Yachts has already “test flown” the full-size ferry by building computer models.

“We can build the boat in a computer and put it in simulated sea conditions,” Bisson said. “We can know where there is a spot to reinforce, or how wave action is transferred through the hull.”

The task wasn’t without challenges, as nobody has ever built a boat like the QE IV before.

“Nothing like it exists,” Bisson said. “Lots of computering for monohulls, but not as much for multihulls. It created some challenges for putting it in.”

According to Bisson, the QE IV will “make a 6-foot wave appear like a 3-foot wave. And, of course, a boat of this stature, a 3-foot wave shouldn’t have any issue.”

Once finished with the computer models, Gold Coast Yachts’ 40 employees built the hull out of carbon fiber, making it super strong and light.

“We are one of the leaders in multihull infusion techniques and some other building techniques. A lot of people would like to copy what we do,” Bisson said.

After four months of work on their 117th boat, Bisson and Gold Coast Yachts were prepping Monday night for Tuesday's launch, which promised to be one of the biggest challenges of the project.

"The boat is not very heavy, but it is physically large," Bisson said. "There is no single crane on St. Croix that can pick it up at that length and reach the water.

And to even get it in position, the yacht builder had to construct a special dolly to move it.

Perhaps displaying a bit of dark humor, Mosler took the pending launch in stride Monday night.

"At Salt River Marina the water is only 5-feet deep, we will be able to salvage it," he said.

Now in the water, the boat will be outfitted with engines and prepped for sea trials during the first part of June, Bisson said. If it passes all of its trials and Coast Guard inspections, the QE IV should be ready to start taking paying passengers by the end of June, or July, according to Bisson.

According to Mosler, it will cost \$50 for the two-hour trip between the Charlotte Amalie waterfront on St. Thomas and Gallows Bay, St. Croix.

"Were going to try to avoid the islands," Mosler said, jokingly, referring to the Royal Miss Belmar's fate as to why the boat would not be going to Red Hook.

Mosler is confident he can break even. "It doesn't burn much fuel," Mosler said, noting it will make the 42-mile crossing between St. Croix and St. Thomas on only 36 gallons of fuel.

"It will take about 10 people to break even," Mosler said.

As for the name, Mosler won't come out and directly say what or who the boat is named for.

He notes that QE I and II refer to famous ocean liners Queen Elizabeth I and II; and that after III, maybe he just wanted to “get a lock on the name” and beat the Federal Reserve to Quantitative Easing IV; or perhaps it has something to do with his wife, Elizabeth O’Toole.

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Daily News Photos by LINDA MORLAND

After waiting for about four hours, people crowd to take pictures of the QE IV ferry as it was launched Tuesday at Salt River Marina on St. Croix.