



Building on His Past

Before he became Australia's largest producer of cruising catamarans, boatbuilder Richard Ward crossed oceans and cruised the Pacific. Now he's looking ahead to fresh challenges, including the impending emergence of China as a marine-industry powerhouse BY HERB McCORMICK

HAVING GROWN UP IN THE TROPICAL Australian state of Queensland, young Richard Ward was a proficient and competitive dinghy sailor who was eventually drawn toward the fledgling big-boat racing scene in his hometown of Brisbane. And like many ambitious Aussie sailors, before long he was ready to test himself on the country's biggest offshore stage: the annual Sydney-Hobart Yacht Race.

It was the late 1960s, and Ward had already secured a berth on a 36-foot Alan Buchanan-designed steel boat aboard which he'd been crewing in local regattas. But there were a couple of obstacles. First, the yacht needed a lot of work to prepare it for the event, and then it required delivery from Brisbane to Sydney. Even more problematic, Ward had recently finished his university studies with a degree in accounting and had landed an entry-level position with an Australian branch of industry giant Arthur Andersen (decades before an infamous client named Enron would spell its demise).

Ward marched into his boss's office and laid his cards on the table. "Look," he said, "I want to do the Hobart but need three months off because we have this old boat we need to



Richard Ward (left) decided years ago to trade spreadsheets and ledgers for racing and cruising. His Seawind Catamarans—a 33-foot Seawind 1000 is pictured above—are already popular in Australia, and now he plans to bring his brand of two-hulled sailing to boat shows along the U.S. East Coast.

strip out, sandblast, and redo."

To his surprise, the response was exactly what he wanted to hear: "That's a wonderful thing for you to do. I'm very supportive of it. Off you go."

He did as instructed, racing to Tasmania and generally living the life of a carefree sailor. Of course, the trouble there is that one is in a vulnerable position to encounter other like-

minded mariners. The one Ward met was a wealthy, 70-something Russian-American sailing a 58-foot ferro-cement ketch bound for the Caribbean. He had a sensational proposition. Would Ward like to come along?

"I thought to myself, 'The boss thought it was a good thing for

me to do last time,” he recalled. “So I went back and asked for another six months off. I remember his exact reply: ‘As far as I’m concerned, you can take the rest of your effing life off!’”

And so Ward was off across the Indian Ocean, with visions of the Virgin Islands dancing in his head. He made it as far as South Africa. Separated in age by some five decades, the discrepancy in years between the retired skipper and his youthful Aussie mate proved to be too vast. “Let’s just say we had a few differences of opinion about what was appropriate behavior once we got ashore,” said Ward.

Still, he was on the outbound leg of his journey, and new ports and adventures were beckoning. He flew to Europe and lived in England for several years, working by day and sailing in all his spare time. “I did a lot of ocean racing, including some Fastnets,” he said. “The One-Ton class was getting hot—Doug Peterson and Ron Holland were hitting the scene—and there was great racing on The Solent.”

However, the racing sailor was starting to mellow. Now in his 20s, what Ward really wanted to do was go cruising. He scraped together enough money to order a 34-foot Van de Stadt design that was built in Sri Lanka and marketed in the United Kingdom as the Legend 34. “She was a glass boat with a gorgeous wood interior,” he said. “She might’ve been a bit heavy, but she was a very nice boat.” Ward sailed her back to Australia and resumed his career, then broke away for a true South Pacific cruise, a voyage that took two and a half years. He returned home in 1982 with a brand-new idea: He was going to become a boatbuilder.

Truth be told, at first the enterprise—Seawind Catamarans—was more of a conceptual notion than a business plan. The first boats built were a series of small, off-the-beach cats called Maricats. “I had no great love for beach cats,” said Ward, “though I soon started racing them. But they were a means to an end, which was getting into the boating industry. Unless you had a lot of money, which I didn’t, it was hard to break into and hard to figure out where you wanted to go within it.” But the Maricats struck a chord; eventually, some 3,000 were built. From there he introduced his first real family cruiser, a trailerable 24-foot cat designed by Scott Jutson called the Seawind 24. The would-be boatbuilder was actually plying the craft.

Not that it was paying all the bills. To make ends meet and bolster the business, Ward landed several lucrative industrial

Seawind Selections

On Sydney Harbour last January, with the Super Bowl playing on the TV in the main saloon, I took a spin on hull number 13 of Seawind’s newest cat, the 1160. In light airs on a still summer morning, we weren’t exactly able to put *No Fear* through its paces. But I was impressed by the quality of the build—Ward employed High Modulus of New Zealand for the initial engineering—and by features that included twin steering stations; dual 120-watt solar panels mounted on the rigid overhead dodger; the nicely executed deck layout, with the self-tacking jib on a Profurl furler; and the nifty cockpit/saloon space that features a clever door that disappears overhead and really opens up the area for living aboard and entertaining.

Seawinds are built in the town of Wollongong, about an hour south of Sydney. The company built 165 1000s, which are no longer in production. Seawind, which employs about 70 people, has taken on custom projects ranging from a stripped-out Formula 40 racer to a 65-foot luxury cat. The company is currently producing the Seawind 1200, a 39-foot-4-inch cruising cat; the 1050 Resort, an open 35-footer for day charters; and the new 1160, which will debut in the United States this fall and for which the company has taken more than 35 orders. Seawind also builds two power cats, the Venturer 38 and 44. For more information, visit the website (www.seawindcats.com). **H.McC.**

projects. “For example, we picked up the contract to build all the bodies for the Sydney buses, about 300 a year,” he said. Next came fiberglass train interiors. By the end of the decade things were booming, and Ward had three factories in operation. But it was all becoming a bit much.

“By the end of 1989 I was running from one factory to the next. There was so much going on,” he said. “It was crazy. I mean, I’d gotten into this to build boats, not trains.” At that juncture, Ward made the decision to sell off the nonmarine arms of the company and concentrate solely on building new boats. “That was it,” he said. “We wouldn’t even take repair work. And that was hard for a few years.

There’s a lot more money in building buses, I can tell you.”

Australia struggled through a recession in the early 1990s, but Ward managed to keep Seawind afloat. A new 28-footer, the Seawind 850, was his bread and butter in those lean times: “We were only building four to six boats a year, but every other yard in Australia seemed to be at a standstill, with just nothing happening at all.”

Perhaps more important, although the production run was modest—in all, Ward built about twenty-five 850s—it kept the idea of cruising catamarans in the thoughts and dreams of many Aussie sailors. So in 1994, as the country broke free from its economic doldrums, the market was ripe for Ward’s next vehicle, the 33-foot Seawind 1000. (For more on the company’s line of boats, see “Seawind Selections,” page 34.)

The boat was an instant success, and it earned the title of Australian Boat of the Year for 1995. Almost immediately, Ward had 30 orders on his hands—so many, in fact, that he shut down production of the 850 to handle the workload. “What the 850 did was build up a lot of curiosity in Australia in that kind of boat,” said Ward. “So when we brought out the 1000, there was just this huge latent interest, and it just burst on us.”

The 1000 established Seawind as a firm player in the Australian boatbuilding scene, a position the company enjoys to this day. But, like niche boatbuilders in the United States and elsewhere, Ward faces many challenges in the years ahead. There’s plenty of wealth in Oz, and its happy citizens aren’t afraid to spend it on leisure. That’s good. But as in the States, the question of where to berth boats, especially beamy catamarans, may become an issue. So, too, is the matter of finding skilled labor to produce them.

Finally, there’s the ongoing reality of increased competition from overseas builders. Ward is quick to note the recent success of such monohull importers as Bavaria and Beneteau, companies that deal in economies of scale quite different from any of their Australian counterparts, the largest of which may be building 20 or 30 boats a year. Pricewise, it makes it difficult to compete with the production giants.

And there’s an X-factor in all this as well, one that may ultimately affect builders around the world: What will China’s role in the marine industry be some 10 or 20 years down the road?

Ward has an opinion: “I think China



will be an awesome force, for several reasons,” he said. “Labor costs are a tenth of what they are in America or Europe. But the interesting thing about China is that there’s a wealthy class there that probably exceeds the entire population of Australia. And the emerging middle class is

also enormous. “On top of that,” he continued, “there’s no coastline in the world as good as the Chinese coastline. You look at it and see that there are thousands and thousands of little bays and islands and places to go. So I think boating will become huge there, and that’s really why I think China will become a big force in the industry. It’s hard to be a world-class builder if you don’t have boating in the country. That’s why it’s failed in Vietnam and Indonesia, because you have people working on projects and they don’t know what the damn things are for. You need that local expertise on the ground to

The 38-foot Seawind 1160 has many pleasing features, including a cockpit/saloon door that lifts out of the way, opening up lots of living and entertaining space.

build good boats. Otherwise, you might do well for a couple of years, but then you’re stuck in a time warp, and you don’t know how to improve. I don’t see that happening in China.”

For Ward, however, China’s not his next target market; no, that would be the United States, where Seawind has made only modest inroads to date. To address that, Ward plans on exhibiting at most of the major boat shows this year, and as a bonus, he plans to cruise his newest boat, the 38-foot 1160, along the Eastern Seaboard from one event to the next.

In a way, he’s returning to his roots, for sailing and voyaging are what prompted him to explore other lands in the first place. “There aren’t many people, I believe, who get a chance to build a product that they’re proud of and that you can sell around the world,” he said. “It’s pretty nice to look back and say, ‘I did that.’ Nope, it’s not a bad life.”

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