

Owners' Club

Living the dream on the world's best boats

*French entrepreneur
Frédéric Jousset's 46m
catamaran ArtExplorer,
currently in build*

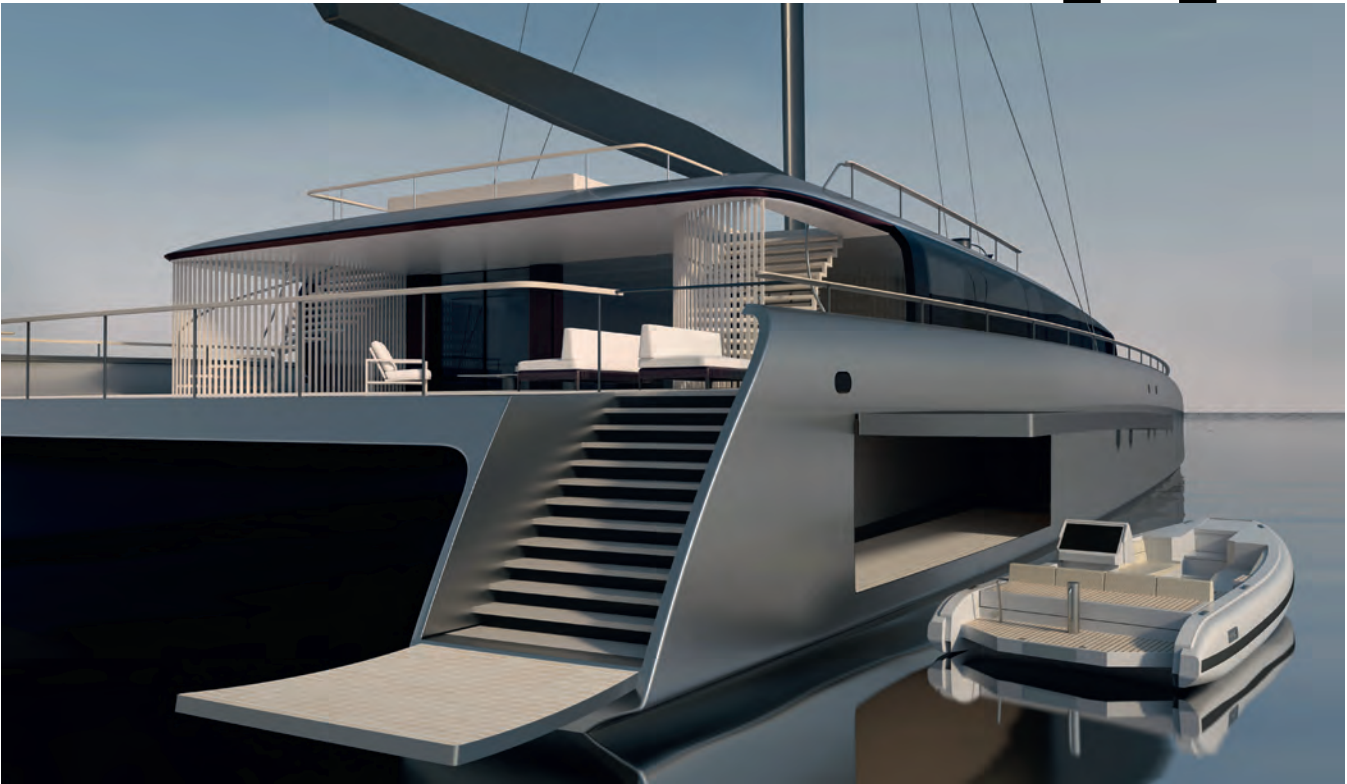


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This month: Frédéric Jousset's grand plan for a gallery at sea / owners and crew in isolation / Eddie Jordan salutes Stirling Moss

ON
BOARD
WITH

Frédéric Jousset



When he was 16, Frédéric Jousset made a bet with his best friend: the winner would be the first to visit every country in the world. There is a little contention over who is actually winning. In 1987, Jousset visited East Germany, which his friend claims shouldn't count as it is no longer a country. If you take this view, they are tied on 114 countries each, with 79 left to see.

"I love to explore," explains the London-based Frenchman and boss of outsourcing giant Webhelp. The wiry 49-year-old is suffering from a cold on the morning we meet at his office a few steps from the Ritz, but he still manages to crackle with a rare energy when describing how he plans to win the bet: by building the biggest sailing catamaran in the world and taking it, well, everywhere.

In doing so he'll be indulging another passion – cultural expropriation. Jousset is an art lover who wants everyone to be. At 35, as a newly minted multimillionaire, he donated a million euros to the Louvre. "The Louvre people were

shocked because most of their donors were either old men or rich American families," he says. "And here comes this guy in his mid-thirties they'd never heard of."

Jousset directed the money be used to attract new audiences to the museum; to make its grand rooms more accessible to a non-traditional demographic. Fifteen years later, he's supercharging this kind of cultural outreach by commissioning ArtExplorer, his 46-metre catamaran project, which has been designed as a superyacht-cum-gallery that will sail to far-flung parts of the globe, democratising the arts as it goes.

The idea came to him on a sailing charter a few years ago. Jousset was at the helm during a night passage to Stromboli, his girlfriend sleeping below. "I was looking at the stars and thinking how much I loved sailing, and then I started to think about how much I loved culture and what I could contribute. I could add another museum, but it's nothing new.

Private foundations have been done, but I thought that no one has thought of the sea, of using a boat as a platform.

"And the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. A boat is an optimal platform because it can go anywhere, and it's a great place to host people. It had to be a sailing yacht because it had to be green and it had to be big to host as many people as possible, so a catamaran makes sense. And that's how I started the process."

When it debuts at La Biennale di Venezia in 2023, ArtExplorer won't only be the world's biggest sailing catamaran, eclipsing 44.2-metre *Hemisphere*, it will be the only yacht of its type in the world, housing a vast main deck exhibition space as well as all the customary superyacht accommodations and appointments. Jousset breaks the

programme down: one month will be reserved for him and his guests; another month will be dedicated to yard work; it will be available to charter for two months; for the remaining eight months of the year ArtExplorer will be used to host exhibitions.

It's a wild idea, but one Jousset is profoundly committed to. The boat will be built "to the highest superyacht standards", he says. Eight teams competed for the job of designing the yacht, which was ultimately won by Axel de Beaufort, head of special projects at Hermès, in collaboration with Japanese designer Oki Sato. It was "love at first sight", says Jousset of their design, which is all sculptural curves and comfortable minimalism – itself a piece of art. A shipyard is expected to be announced imminently for the three-year build.

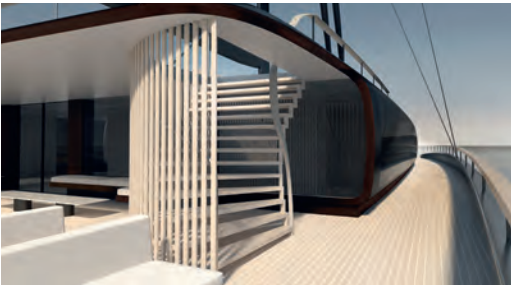
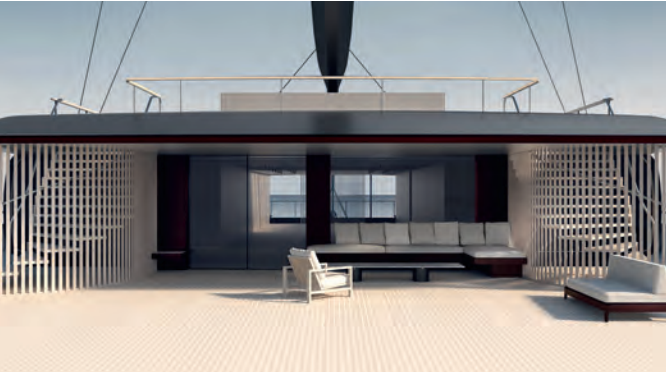
Until then, Jousset will be preoccupied by the small task of running Webhelp, with its 140 offices in 35 countries and 55,000 employees. Today, the company is a world-leading business

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solutions provider, its success a testament to Jousset's entrepreneurial nous and nimble mind. But that doesn't mean it has always been easy – there has been no shortage of dramatic knife-edge moments in Webhelp's 20-year story.

The most significant came early in the company's life. In the late 1990s, Jousset and his business partner Olivier Duha were working at consultancy Bain & Company, but neither saw a future there. "I realised that doing PowerPoint presentations for other people was not something that fascinated me. We thought: 'Why don't we join forces and try to find something else?'"

Their idea was to scour North America for a tech business they could import to Europe. "We came across a Canadian company called Webhelp, which had just announced it had raised C\$40 million (£22.8m). We thought we could team up and launch it in Europe," says Jousset.



When it debuts in 2023, the 46m ArtExplorer will be the world's biggest sailing catamaran and will host art exhibitions at sea



RENDERING: AXEL DE BEAUFORT-AXEL DE BEAUFORT-ARTHUR GUINET-FRANÇOIS ROELANTS





The task of designing ArtExplorer was won by Axel de Beaufort (left), head of special projects at Hermès, in collaboration with Oki Sato (below)



The company was an early pioneer in the internet search industry. Users could input a query and within three minutes a “web wizard” would locate relevant content and push it to them via a novel chat feature.

“It was the first human-assisted real-time search engine,” says Jousset. “Nowadays it makes you laugh because it looks like the Stone Age, but you have to remember it was 1999. We thought it was just brilliant.” The key to the business were the people answering users’ queries – Webhelp had outsourced everything to India. Jousset and Duha travelled to Canada and cut a deal: if they could raise \$5 million in four weeks, they could launch Webhelp as a joint venture in France.

“Sometimes in life you do stupid things that you can’t explain and we thought that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. So we resigned by fax and had four weeks to find \$5 million.” They ended up raising \$16 million, including a sizeable chunk from LVMH boss Bernard Arnault, but decided to only take five. “That was the second stupid thing we did – today you would take the money! But we thought we

“A friend called me and said, ‘Have you checked out this new website called Google? It does what you do, but a bit different’... and then we saw their traffic”

would be too diluted if we took all \$16 million.”

They launched Webhelp in France in 2000, outsourcing the web wizard work to Romania, which had a ready population of young, hungry, tech-savvy graduates with a good grasp of French. “We had big traffic, lots of press, lots of noise, like we were new French heroes disrupting the way people search. One month later I’m sitting at my desk and a friend called me and said: ‘Have you checked out this new website called

Google? It does what you do, but a bit different.’

“I remember seeing the Google homepage for the first time, all white with just this box. The question we asked to demonstrate the efficiency for human search engines was ‘How old is Mickey Mouse?’ So I keyed that in and boom, a million pages, in milliseconds. And suddenly it’s like you’re selling candles and someone else is selling electricity. And then we saw their traffic...”

The Webhelp ship started sinking – fast.



Frédéric Jousset throws himself into his projects, whether its scaling Mount Everest (above) or donating a million euros to the Louvre (below)



The company was burning cash and had to pivot. “Our remaining asset was our Romanian workforce. They were cheap, they were smart, and we had a chat technology that was quite efficient. We thought: ‘Why don’t we go to the Amazons, the first e-commerce websites, and offer a white-label customer service using our chat technology.’”

They got contracts with five French websites, taking a cut of every product sold, and at the end of their first year in business had revenues of

Above: Jousset launched search startup WebHelp in 2000. Right: with WebHelp co-founder Olivier Duha (right) in 2015



€80,000 (£69,000). They added email management to their offering and at the close of 2001 had 20 clients and revenues of €500,000. “Then our clients said: ‘When our customers are really angry, they want to reach out and talk to someone, so you should come up with a solution for that.’” French call centres already existed, but no one had thought of putting them offshore, so Jousset and Duha opened a call centre in French-speaking Morocco. “And then things sky-rocketed,” he says. “We started with 40 people, then 100, then 200, then 3,000 and then all of a sudden we had 5,000 people.”

In 2010, revenues had grown to €200 million and last year the company was valued at €2.4 billion after diversifying into the full suite of business solutions. It’s been almost breakneck growth, but Jousset remains unfazed; he clearly

doesn’t rattle easily, which is important given some of his extracurricular passions. He recently scaled Everest and is an extreme skier and diver, regularly going down to 50 metres.

“At that depth, if anything goes wrong with your bottles or equipment, you’re screwed,” he says with cool sangfroid. “It’s not just for the sake of it. It’s not that I want to kill myself, but it’s something I need because otherwise I am not happy. It’s more a positive thing, I guess.” He can’t explain where it comes from, this need to live an edgy existence, but his sister has it too: she’s a foreign correspondent and documentary maker who regularly embeds herself in some of the world’s sketchier places.

He has always pushed himself and excelled

QUICKFIRE Frédéric Jousset

CHEF OR CHAUFFEUR?

Definitely chef, being French. Plus, I like driving too much.

SPEED OR STYLE?

Speed. I love speed. That’s why I want to build a fast boat. I’m an extreme skier and I race cars. I’m an adrenaline junkie.

FIRST THING YOU PACK?

My battery charger. If I’ve forgotten it, I’ll turn the car round and go get it.

HOW MANY WATCHES?

Zero. No – one. I have an old Breguet but it’s so expensive I’m afraid of losing or damaging it, so I never wear it.

FAVOURITE BEACH?

Domaine de Murtoli in Corsica.

FAVOURITE CAR?

1964 AC Cobra. I have one and race it at Le Mans Classic.

YOUR IDEA OF LUXURY?

Privacy and silence on a big farm where there is no one around.



academically, ultimately graduating from HEC Paris, the country's leading business school. Then came mandatory national service in the French Army, but instead of simply riding it out, he extended his service and volunteered for the paratroop regiment, rising to platoon commander.

"I remember the first day joining the regiment – you had to walk for 120 kilometres with full gear on, weighing probably 20 kilos. And you had to do this in less than 36 hours, which meant walking constantly, in leather boots. I remember walking while sleeping, but once you do that it's immensely useful because when you do business negotiations and it's 3am, everyone around you is tired, but I'm not because I know I can walk for 36 hours. That confidence in yourself from a physical standpoint holds forever."

His mind he takes care of by retreating to a monastery in Normandy each year and handing over all his technology to the monks. He doesn't speak for three days, which provides a useful reset. His soul, meanwhile, belongs to the sea. Until this point, he has always chartered yachts, including, memorably, the massive 78.55-metre classic, *SS Delphine*. In 2008 he was engaged and due to be married in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat and had booked the superyacht for brunch. "But 10 days before the wedding I got cold feet and called it off," he says.

His charter broker didn't care. "No can do," came the answer when Jousset asked if he could



"We went cruising from Saint-Tropez to Portofino and back. It is the best memory. I realised how much I liked it, so that's how I got into superyachts – by accident"

cancel the booking. The only thing his broker could do was switch the dates, so Jousset decided to take the yacht on his birthday, 3 May, add two more days to the charter and pack it with 25 friends – and his new girlfriend. "We went cruising from Saint-Tropez to Portofino and back. It is the best memory. We partied like there was no tomorrow. And I realised how much I liked it, so that's how I got into superyachts – by accident."

Nowadays, he's much more deliberate in his yachting choices, and has a very clear vision for ArtExplorer: he wants it to become the centrepiece of a foundation that will one day include planes, trucks, buses – whatever moves and is capable of spreading culture beyond the walls of museums and galleries. In 20 years he'd like it to be the "equivalent of Greenpeace for art and culture", he says, with millions of followers, subscribers and volunteers.

It's a hugely ambitious plan, but coming from a guy who has conquered the business world and Mount Everest, I'd say he's a safe bet. And by then he might have won his, too. ■

Above: Jousset's cancelled wedding led to a hedonistic Med charter on the 78.5m SS Delphine in 2008. Right: ArtExplorer will be available for charter for two months of the year

