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STEFAN'S WORLD

AUSTRALIA'S BEST-KNOWN HAIRDRESSER HAS ALREADY DISRUPTED THE AUSTRALIAN BOAT MARKET ONCE WITH THE LAUNCH OF STEFAN BOATING WORLD. NOW STEFAN ACKERIE IS CONTEMPLATING SHAKING IT UP AGAIN WITH A NEW VENTURE.

NIGEL BOWEN INVESTIGATES WHY A MAN WHO'S ALREADY ACHIEVED SO MUCH IS DRIVEN TO KEEP ADDING TO HIS VARIED LIST OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

“I’m a Phoenician, it is in my blood,” laughs Stefan,

a.k.a Steve, Ackerie when I ask when he first became interested in boating. “My father fiddled around with boats and I’ve always been keen. Soon after I arrived in Australia from Lebanon at 17 I bought a Lewis racing hull skiff and since then I’ve always had boats. Boats for barefoot skiing, houseboats for staff functions, power boats for racing and luxury boats like *Hairazor*.”

The Phoenicians, who primarily resided on the coastline of what is now Lebanon circa 1200-539BC, were renowned for being enterprising traders as well as skilled boatbuilders and sailors (they’re credited with the invention of the bireme, a high-speed galley powered by two decks of oars).

So if Ackerie describes himself as Phoenician it’s probably because a civilisation built on two of his great passions – business and boating – has a strong appeal to him, even if it did die out two millennia ago.

Ackerie left Lebanon and arrived in Adelaide back in 1957. Within a decade he’d moved north and started what was to become a large chain



of hairdressing salons throughout Queensland. Since then he has marketed various hair and beauty products, opened a restaurant in Brisbane, got a pilot’s licence and bankrolled several charity initiatives such as a food van for homeless people and a foundation to deliver toys to hospitalised children. He’s also been showered with business awards such as Employer of the Year (he’s famous for acknowledging the efforts of high-performing staff with tokens of appreciation such as Mercedes-Benz cars) as

well as being nominated for Australian of the Year.

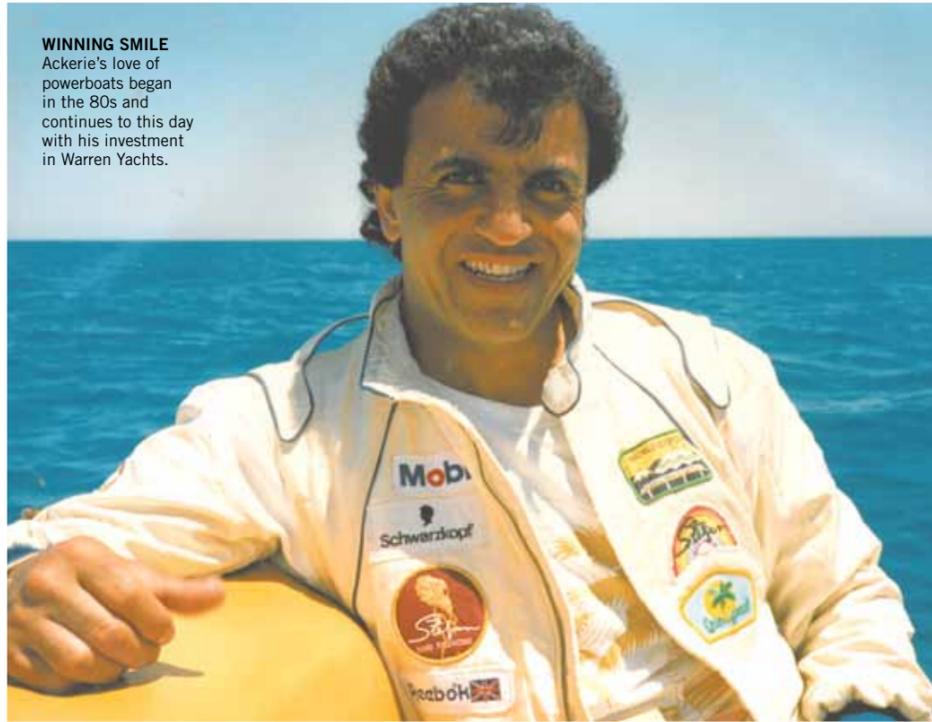
While all that might have been enough for other men, Ackerie also found the time to become one of the dominant figures in Australian powerboat racing. “My involvement started when I was asked to sponsor a boat in the early 80s,” he explains. “One day I was taken out – they were trying to scare me but I loved it and started competing in events such as the Cairns to Brisbane race. Then the man who had the best boat and team in Australia passed them on to me when he retired from the sport and it went from there.”

SUNSHINE YEARS

Ackerie, seen here with partner Rose King, shows no signs of slowing down in his 70s. Left: Ackerie shows off his handy work in one of his iconic hair salons.



WINNING SMILE
Ackerie's love of powerboats began in the 80s and continues to this day with his investment in Warren Yachts.



Obviously uncomfortable with the idea that there might exist any limitations to what he can do, Ackerie quickly turns the conversation to Stefan Boating World, the new venture he's sunk \$10 million into. We're speaking a few days before the official launch at the Sanctuary Cove International Boat Show and, as we chat, staff members keep popping in to ask Ackerie for his input or sign-off on various last-minute dramas and details.

Early press coverage has focused on the cheapness of the wares on offer but Ackerie wants to make it clear his offerings are impressive as well as affordable. "I've never been a person to compete on price. So, yes, while these boats are financially a good deal that is not their greatest asset," he insists. "Their greatest asset is that they have a point of difference: there's the RIB with a clear bottom, which is great in clear water, and there's something called the Razar Cat that's a combination of a Jet-Ski and a rubber ducky. I'm also importing all 12 boats from the Karnic Open Line range, and they are the most luxurious small boats I've ever seen. They can be used as overnighters or luxury fishing boats.

"You know, the boating business is just like any other business. It's about getting a team of people together, coming up with a competitively priced product and serving people. In any of my hairdressing salons or at my restaurant, if the customer isn't satisfied we give them their money back. Obviously you can't do that with a \$100,000 boat but there is the same commitment to doing the right thing and keeping the customer happy. The secret to business is that people want to be happy when they buy something, they don't want to feel ripped off. And if you do the right thing, people reciprocate."

Ackerie's enthusiasm for making boating more accessible doesn't mean he lacks an appreciation for what's on offer at the top end of the market. This is the man, after all, who lovingly crafted the 25-metre catamaran *Hairazor* and prevented Warren Yachts from disappearing into oblivion.

When Ackerie bought the boat that was to become *Hairazor*, it was little more than a hulk that had been languishing since its original owner ran out of money. With the assistance of designer Duncan Van Woerden, the man behind maxi-yacht *Windward Passage II*, Stefan fitted it out with carbon fibre, Kevlar composite materials and an end-grain balsa core. Even with a marble-heavy décor, four bedrooms, four bathrooms and a generous alfresco dining space it still weighed in at only 26 tonnes when, by rights, it should have been three times as heavy.

Despite describing it as "the most beautiful thing I've ever seen" when it launched in early 2011, Ackerie informs me he's recently sold it to a Kiwi buyer, though even now he can't stop raving about its fuel efficiency. "It got to New Zealand on 2000 litres of fuel! Can you imagine a 90-footer doing that? It's an amazing boat. I'd like to build more like it but I don't think the world is going wild for \$6-\$7 million boats at the moment."

Not that a tough market for luxury vessels dissuaded Ackerie from snapping up Warren Yachts when it was hovering on the brink of death. "I'd long admired Warren Yachts – their lines, their style – so I jumped in and bought it when it came on the market. The sale included a yacht that was in the process of being built and, much like what happened with *Hairazor*, we came in and improved it. We extended it from 87 to 97 feet, added a magnificent flybridge, made the lounge bigger, the dining room freer. When the boat is finished in around six months it will make a lot of noise. As to what happens then, well, we will play it by ear. If people want more, we will build them. Warren Yachts could be the next journey after Stefan Boat World."



HAIR CARE
Ackerie's former superyacht *Hairazor* is a triumph of restoration that weighs an extraordinarily light 26 tonnes.

"I LIKE TO BUILD THINGS, EMPLOY PEOPLE, MAKE OTHERS HAPPY."

Three decades on, having notched up achievements such as the fastest crossings of the Bass and Malacca Straits, as well as nearly coming to grief at least twice in fiery incidents caused by exploding tanks, he's showing no signs of slowing down. "People have trouble understanding why I do it, but I have trouble understanding why people play football or golf. What I'm doing now is

record runs, which is easier than racing because you can pick your day. When you turn up to a race and it is 12-foot whitecaps, that's tough."

Perhaps it's time to embrace the more genteel pursuit of yacht racing, I suggest.

"Peter Harburg is one of my best friends and he's always trying to get me to come out racing on *Black Jack*. But I'm scared to take him up on the offer in case I like it. I think it takes time to get good at things and I don't know if I have the time to get good at that."



At an age when most are contemplating retirement, Stefan Ackerie is planning on embarking on plenty more journeys. "I truly believe that in the game of life you've got to keep doing things. If God – or whoever it is you believe in – gives you a talent you should use it, not just put it away in the cupboard."

While he was well known in Queensland before then, Ackerie was most in the public eye during the go-go 80s. He was perhaps the most flamboyant of a brash new generation of entrepreneurs rewriting the rules of both how business was done and captains of industry behaved. As was subsequently revealed, many of those self-made tycoons went overboard when it came to rewriting the rules. With our time drawing to a close, I ask Ackerie one last question: why has he continued to thrive when so many of his peers have fallen by the wayside?

"I actually know Alan Bond," he replies. "In fact, I found some old photos of us together just the other day that put a smile on my face. But the likes of Alan Bond and Christopher Skase, they're different to what I am. I like to build things, employ people, make others happy. I like normal mirrors not magic ones."

And with that the tireless Phoenician-Australian politely bids me farewell and returns his attention to expanding his wide-ranging empire. ○

www.stefanboatingworld.com