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# Cruise control

It's largely down to Sarina Bratton that booking a passage on Fairstar the Fun Ship is no longer the only option for Australians wanting to take a domestic cruise. Here she explains to Nigel Bowen how having a promising sporting career unexpectedly cut short set her on a path to launching the world's first female-owned cruise line.

Images Mathieu Gesta

Though she was a water baby who, according to her mother, crawled towards the ocean's edge the first time she was taken from her Bondi home to the beach, Sarina Bratton didn't grow up dreaming of becoming an Australian version of Aristotle Onassis.

"It was a sporting career I was focused on," says Bratton. "At age 17 I held Australian medals in diving, trampoline and gymnastics and my goal was to get to the Olympics. I was training every morning and night. I suppose you could say I was driven though I didn't see it that way at the time. I just threw myself into those sports because I enjoyed them and probably because I like

standing on the winner's dais."

But the chance to stand on an Olympic dais disappeared in a split second when the 17-year-old Bratton did irreparable damage to her Achilles tendon while competing. "It was a really difficult time but I did discover there was this whole other world of boys and parties out there," she says. "There were all sorts of things I hadn't experienced before so I went from one extreme to the other."



injury forced Bratton to abandon her Olympic goals.

The next few years is perhaps the only period in Bratton's life when the inveterate overachiever had something approaching an unexceptional existence, backpacking around the world and working in hospitality to save up for the plane ticket to the next destination. After arriving back in Australia broke, she grabbed a receptionist's job on the front desk of Sydney's Wentworth Hotel. After clambering swiftly up the greasy pole at the Wentworth she was headhunted by Cunard. It was the early 80s, Bratton was in her late twenties, the domestic cruise industry was dominated by P&O's cheap and cheerful offerings and Cunard's Australian branch was a fledgling operation, employing a couple of people and turning over \$300,000 a year. Over the course of a decade and a half, Bratton raised revenues to \$30 million but when she tried to convince Cunard's head office in New York to launch a four-star operation down under, they balked.

"These were the years when the international cruising industry was taking off and travellers were starting to go on trips to out-of-the-way places such as Alaska," she says. "I argued the business case for Cunard to launch an upmarket cruise line, differentiated from what the likes of P&O were offering, down here. Cunard told me, 'We like the concept but we're a five-star business so we should launch a five-star cruise line.' I said the market in Australia wasn't ready for five star. Then I decided, if I really believed in my idea, I should go and do it myself."



One of the five-star Ponant cruise ships Le Boreal cruising Antarctica.

But raising the capital to launch a cruise line is no simple matter and there's an added degree of difficulty involved if you're the first woman in the world ever to attempt it. "I spoke to lots of venture capitalists, financiers and private equity groups," Bratton says. "I had a lot of doors slammed in my face and was given many reasons why the idea would never work. Things certainly took longer than I expected but I maintained a very, very clear vision of what needed to be done and eventually found some people who understood the industry and the concept of opening up Australia and nearby countries to four-star cruising."

Those people were the Miami-based decision-makers at Norwegian Cruise Lines. A joint venture, Norwegian Capricorn Line, was launched in 1998 and in Bratton's pithy summation, "Went from a blank sheet of paper to generating \$130 million of revenue in 22 months."

Holding Australian medals in diving, trampoline and gymnastics, an



Steve McLaughlin.

Sarina with new appointments at PONANT, Monique Ponfoort and

Then, in a blow even more painful than having her dreams of Olympic glory snatched away, everything fell apart. Norwegian Cruise Lines went through a hostile takeover and its new owner proved uninterested in showcasing Australia as a cruising destination. "I'd put everything into the business and to have it taken away when it was doing so well was devastating, like a death in the family," Bratton says. The joint venture was wound up late 2000 and, after a stint as deputy mayor of the Sydney Paralympics village, Bratton began working on a business plan for a cruise line that couldn't be easily wrenched from her grasp.

"I opted to go niche rather than doing whatever everyone else was doing and have big ships stop in at the mainstream ports. I thought the Kimberley had great potential, if I could work out a way for ships to safely navigate the huge whirlpools and difficult conditions caused by the 10-12 metre tidal ranges. Nick and Marilynne Paspaley of Paspaley Pearls fame provided their private survey work of the waters in the region and ended up investing as well. I also had a ship that was purpose-built to go to Antarctica." In 2004 Orion Expedition Cruises was launched and has gone on to set the benchmark for sustainable marine tourism, pioneer a host of new cruising destinations and win enough luxury travel awards to fill a state room. A decade on and Orion is still going strong. But Bratton, who resolved to maintain a degree of emotional distance with her second cruise line, is no longer involved. "I sold a lot of my holding to a private equity group in 2008 and sold the remaining shares early this year, as well as stepping down as managing director, in April, 2013," she says. "There's never an easy time to exit a business, especially one you've created, but there is always a time."



in 2006.

Sarina was the winner of the Veuve Clicquot Businesswoman of the Year

After walking away from Orion, Bratton was looking forward to a golf-filled, long-lunching semi-retirement involving nothing more strenuous than sitting on some boards, continuing to contribute to various sporting organisations and mentoring young athletes and businesspeople.

But just when she thought she was out of the cruise-line game, they pulled her back in. "I had a number of approaches from international companies wanting me to work with them at a strategic level. One offer was from the French luxury cruise and five-star expedition operator Compagnie du Ponant and when I looked at their business and the stylish, brand new, superyacht-looking ships and the three-masted sailing vessel that made up their fleet I thought, 'The opportunity that this company has to be the global leader of five star expedition cruising is enormous.' I told them I wasn't interested in a job but they convinced me to agree to a part-time consulting role to help internationalise their business and product, with a particular focus on developing the Australian and Asian markets."

Given the deal with Ponant involves her taking an equity stake, this latest venture could be seen as Bratton's third cruise line, though she says she's determined to start winding up her extraordinary career and free up more time to work on her golf swing at some point. "I've signed up for three years," she says, before adding, "though there is the option to renew my contract."

I wrap up by asking Bratton if she'd be interested in taking a relaxing cruise, should she ever manage to retire. "No, I've never gone on a cruise for a holiday – I get seasick! That said, I do love being on the water. My husband I have had a number of boats over the years, including a 40-foot Riviera. I find being out on a boat – or even just a kayak – with no demands on me or expectations I need to fulfil, probably the most relaxing times I have."



Bratton has had a vine planted in her honour in France.

### SARINA'S TOP 10

1. My Scotty Cameron putter. After selling out of Orion I took up golf, thinking I'd have a lot of time to work on getting my handicap down.
2. When I won the Veuve Clicquot Business Woman of the Year award in 2006 I had a vine planted in my honour. I'm invited every year to go pick the grapes of my vine in France, which I haven't taken up as yet. I do have a bottle of Sarina Bratton labelled La Grande Dame Champagne which I treasure.
3. My friends recently got me a beautiful Baume et Mercier watch for my birthday. It's gold and silver and has a square pearl face with diamonds on it.
4. Just prior to my 50th birthday I was on a cruise featuring a promotion for Russian diamonds. I suggested to my husband he could buy me a Tiffany-designed ring decorated with Russian diamonds as my birthday present. He balked at the price but I didn't have much difficulty convincing myself it was a worthwhile purchase.
5. Two decades ago I helped out a young singing group called the Four Tracks. To thank me, they put on a show at my 40th birthday dinner party. That group went onto tremendous success and these days they call themselves Human Nature.
6. My Newport house in Horseshoe Cove, between the Royal Motor Yacht Club and Royal Print Alfred Yacht Club. It's a piece of paradise.
7. I need another boat like a hole in the head but Orion were recently getting rid of their fishing boat from the ship and it happened to be one that had been named after our daughter, so for sentimental reasons I had to buy it.
8. My collection of magnificent artefacts, which I've accumulated over the years in my travels to places such as Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, Arnhem Land and the Russian Far East.
9. I can't single out a favourite boat but we've got kayaks, a Zodiac, a tinny and a Laser dinghy at the end of our jetty at Newport.
10. One of my most treasured possessions is a sculpture Kay Cottee created of her boat 'First Lady' in the Southern Ocean. We co-own Yamba Marina with Kay and her husband Peter and she's a good friend.

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