

THE ART OF CRAFT WORK

Only 31 of their kind have been made in the past quarter-century. Each one takes up to 10,000 hours of labour to make. And now the latest technology complements their romantic appeal. This is the exclusive world of Swedish boatbuilders J Craft.

by **peter howarth**

“It takes me about 50 minutes to get from my place on the Côte d’Azur to Saint-Tropez in my J Craft Torpedo, and about two hours, 50 minutes in a Ferrari,” says Jacques Sicotte. He should know. As the owner of one of the world’s largest Ferrari collections, and one of only 200 Ferrari ambassadors worldwide, this Canadian nuclear engineer has tried the route into town a few times and discovered that it is a traffic magnet.

Not so the open sea. Sicotte keeps his J Craft Torpedo, called Temptation, in a marina near his house and garage in the south of France, and uses his yacht as a daily runaround. “We go on trips as a family, of course, but we also use it for shopping and even collecting the kids from school,” he says.

Sicotte is a keen driver — he races in the Ferrari Challenge Series on Formula One circuits — and says that piloting a J Craft Torpedo gives him a pleasing sense of speed. The 42ft boat can do up to 47

knots and handle waves of up to 14ft. “I’m a powder skier,” Sicotte says, “and honestly, taking the turns effortlessly in the J Craft when the sea is flat is the nearest thing I can get to that feeling.”

If you haven’t heard of J Craft, it is not surprising. The J Craft owners’ club is super-exclusive, as only 31 have been made since the first was commissioned by the king of Sweden in 1999. Since then, each vessel has been meticulously crafted by hand at the firm’s boatyard on the Swedish island of Gotland by a small group of artisans, taking between 8,000 to 10,000 hours a pop (which is the equivalent of one person working for four and a half years).

If these guys (and the one female carpenter) sound like something out of a Viking saga, they don’t disappoint in person. The head of the shipyard, Johan Hallén, a 6’2” bear of a man with grey ponytail and beard, is a former Swedish navy mine diver and has worked on each of the boats since they launched. His colleague, Master Builder Zoltan Antunovic, is all tattoos and, again, big beard. Visiting boat owners have been known to feel a little worse for wear after a night out with these two and their team.

Sicotte remembers when he first came, with his wife and young son, to see how the boats are made. Charmingly, the craftsmen made his boy a Viking helmet. “You can see that everything is made by hand, the old way,” Sicotte says. He says a J Craft is really “an artwork”, making an analogy with the way that cars were once coach-built. Symbolically, perhaps, each J Craft has a Ferrari 250

GTO steering wheel made by Nardi located in its wooden or rose-polished-steel dash.

J Craft was the brainchild of Björn Jansson, a Swede who, because of ill health, handed over the company to Radenko Milakovic after the German former hedge funder fell in love with the design one morning in Monaco. “I was looking out of my window,” Milakovic recalls, “and I saw this beautiful boat below. I literally ran down and asked the guy on board what it was.”

Milakovic hired it for a few weeks, and realised that while it looked wonderful — all glowing mahogany-wood veneer and streamlined curves; as he says, “pure dolce vita” — it required skill above his level to captain. He sought out Jansson and suggested a number of modifications that would make the vessel more forgiving for someone like him. Discovering that Jansson was ill, they agreed that Milakovic would buy the firm and become the steward of

Jansson’s vision. The new owner then set about getting the team to reimagine the engineering for an upgraded model called the Torpedo.

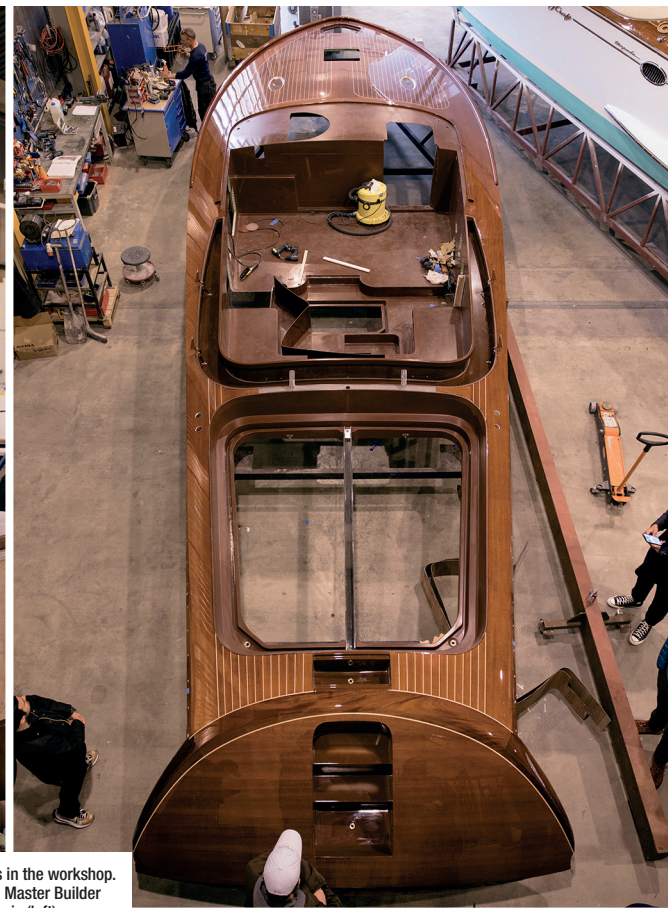
Today, a J Craft Torpedo still looks like a classic boat, with mahogany, teak and steel giving it its character, but it is packed with the latest tech. You can even steer one with a Garmin watch for the full 007 experience. Actually, the hull and deck are not wood at all but made of fully recyclable vacuum-infused fibreglass, veneered with cultivated mahogany to provide that beautiful warm old-school look, without the headache of maintaining a wooden construction.

Without wanting to get too techie, I can say that having piloted one, operating a J Craft Torpedo is incredibly intuitive. The Volvo IPS pod drives enable you to manoeuvre in the tightest of spaces with a joystick that allows you to literally move sideways; gyroscopic stabilisers mean you can handle rough seas; touchscreen controls provide easy command; and a Skyhook digital anchor means navigation is sorted. Talk about a successful marriage of form and function. Milakovic is something of a gadget enthusiast, so he’s developing more kit for the boat, including bulletproof glass for the windscreen — not for more James Bond antics but because it will make it virtually indestructible in bad weather.

But none of this detracts from the sheer romance of the vessel. Earlier this year, J Craft partnered with Dunhill to install a removable drinks cabinet made by the British luxury firm that you can take from your boat onto dry land at the end of the day.

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J Craft artisans in the workshop. Bottom right: Master Builder Zoltan Antunovic (left), owner Radenko Milakovic, and Chief Technical Officer Johan Hallén.



Johan makes the final checks, and the boats are almost ready to take to sea.



A Swedish flag flies proudly from one of J Craft's exquisite boats.



At the recent Monaco Yacht Show, the latest creation to roll out of the shipyard in Gotland, a J Craft Torpedo called Amazon Queen, showed off its specially created Fortuny upholstery. The Venetian fabric specialists, who have been making hand-made materials for more than a century, succeed Hermès and Loro Piana, both previous suppliers of interior furnishings to the Swedish firm.

Amazon Queen is owned by Fred Coyle, a former United States F-15 fighter pilot who, after waiting 15 months for her delivery, travelled to Sweden to pick her up before embarking on a cruise around the Baltic and the western Mediterranean. You see, what really distinguishes a J Craft from other modern yachts in its segment is that, although possessing a vintage look, the Torpedo, while small enough for a large lake or river, is big enough to sail in open seas and is certified to do so. It can also sleep four in its cabin.

Coyle's Amazon Queen is now heading to the U.S., where she will split her time between his homes on Florida's Gulf coast and on the Fort Loudoun Lake and Tennessee River. The former pilot loves the speed and handling of his new acquisition, but most of all he enjoys the admiring looks she attracts. As well as the wood and Fortuny fabrics, a highlight for him is the custom metallic-finish Royal Prussian Hohenzollern-family blue paint job on the hull.

"It's a gorgeous boat, the curves, the hourglass shape of it... It's a beautiful, beautiful boat," he says. "It's also the best driving boat I've ever been around. I was a pilot in the Air Force, and it's almost like flying my F-15 fighter on the water. It just handles incredibly."

A J Craft Torpedo starts at £1.4m

j-craftboats.com



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