

A MODERN MARINER

RESTORING SEAN KENNEDY'S
1920S MOTOR YACHT WITH A NOD
TO UP-TO-DATE COMFORTS

Text by Annette Tapert/Photography by Scott Frances



You may have seen it in a Victoria's Secret catalogue or on the cover of *Cigar Aficionado*. Perhaps you saw it in the 1987 film *Wall Street*. Then again, you may have read about it in a gossip column several years ago where it was reported that a rock diva threw her thirtieth birthday bash on board.

The *Mariner III* is one busy motor yacht. When it's not fulfilling someone's romantic fantasies of an era when yachtsmen wore crisp white trousers, smart blue blazers and jaunty caps, the boat does not sit lonely at either of its homes—the Palm Beach Yacht Club and the Chelsea Piers in Manhattan. Instead, it is tended to and

doted on by its owner, Sean Kennedy. Its story begins in 1926, when Captain James Griffiths, a steamship company magnate and the commodore of the Seattle Yacht Club, commissioned noted boat designer Ted Geary to build him a 122-foot fantail motor yacht.

Together they traveled to China to select the timber for

Above: Sean Kennedy's motor yacht, the *Mariner III*, was restored by designers Robert Bray, Michael Schaible and Mitchell Turnbull to a condition recalling its 1920s construction. Above Left: The bridge deck, with its view into the pilot house, is used for sunbathing.

its construction, assembled it in knockdown fashion and shipped the materials to Seattle, where it was fitted. When the work was completed, the boat was the largest wooden yacht in the country.

It changed hands three times before 1979, when Kennedy's father spotted it from a seaplane while flying over the Palm Beach Yacht Club.

"The family yacht we'd had for almost thirty years had gone down in a storm the year before," says Kennedy. "It was similar in architecture to the *Mariner*, so when my father saw it, he knew he'd found a replacement, and he moored the plane right next to it."

Kennedy, who grew up in Biloxi, Mississippi, descends from a long line of yachts-

men. His grandfather founded the Kennedy Engine Co., makers of diesel engines for workboats and oil-rig machinery. "Dad brought the boat back to Biloxi. The exterior needed substantial cosmetic work. All the retired workers from the shipyard that my grandfather owned came out of retirement to refit her."

In the mid-1980s Kennedy turned the floating family homestead into a successful charter business, as well as a location for film and advertising shoots. With that decision came a lifestyle change: Since then he has used the boat as one of several homes. In 1997 he married his wife, Francesca, on the upper deck, and now Finn, their twenty-



"We took a lighter and more care-free approach to the main saloon than we typically do in our work," Bray says. The designers removed a fiberglass ceiling to reveal mahogany beams and refurbished the original lead-crystal windows. Donghia fabric on the chairs and sofa.

Kennedy's decision two years ago to rework the boat's interior was a result of his friendship with Mitchell Turnbough, the associate with Bray-Schaible Design

in New York. "I was on the *Mariner* many times before the project, and I saw the effort that was put into the exterior," remembers Turnbough, "but the same attention to detail wasn't being given to the inside, so over a long period of time I kept

discussing the possibilities with Sean."

The interior, in fact, had changed on a regular basis, but the same point of view was continually reapplied. "In general, yachting interiors are confused with commercial design," observes

Turnbough. "I think the Kennedys took direction from designers in the yachting community, whereas they instinctively understood the aesthetics for the exterior." "Everything we did, everywhere," says Robert Bray, "was to take something off, not add.

Because the wood was well maintained and varnished, we never had to take something back to its original splendor." The aft deck is a prime example of an exercise in editing. The teak dining table was original to the boat, but the wicker chairs were

more appropriate for a Florida patio. "In Sean's eyes," says Michael Schaible, "the table was part of the architecture of the boat, so we wanted something more architectural that reflected the era."

The team commissioned a Maine-based company specializing in sturdy outdoor furniture to make teak chairs that complement the lines of both boat and table. The aft banquette had always had blue cushions made out of a weather-repellent synthetic fabric used for sails and sun-deck furniture. The designers saw that it was just a matter of redefining the shade and covered the cushions in a true nautical blue.

They also surmised that over the years the previous owners had followed the "let's make it more modern" philosophy. The main saloon had a fiberglass-laminate ceiling and wall-to-wall carpeting that dated back to at least the late fifties, taking the romance right out of the room.

As for the décor, Kennedy's main concern was to be able to seat as many people as possible for those rainy days when cabin fever sets in. He also wanted the room to be comfortable enough for watching a video in the evening. The only other client request came from Francesca Kennedy, who wanted a Savonnerie rug.

The design team envisioned a room that reflected the twenties without looking camp. "We didn't use references of the period," explains Bray, "as much as the thought and attitude of the period." The furniture of Pierre Chateau inspired the high-back upholstered pieces. "The room gets so much use," Bray continues, "that the upholstery is changed about every two seasons. Because of that, we wanted to be more playful than we might normally be." They covered the furniture in dark brown wool and double-trimmed every seam in moss green. "We nev-



The designers reinstated the original ceiling, which had been teak with exposed mahogany beams. The teak floor of the saloon saw the light of day for the first time in years, as the three chose to remove the carpeting and re-finish and oil the floor.

"The entire process was more fun than challenging," notes Bray. Above: The table in the mahogany-paneled dining room was made for the boat by Ted Geary, the yacht's builder and designer. The bronze candlesticks are 1930s French, from Karl Kemp & Assoc.



The master stateroom was also restored to its pre-1930 condition, then accented with Italian mahogany lamps, from Karl Kemp, and a 1940s wedding bedcovering. The blue-black wool carpet is from Patterson, Flynn & Martin. Edelman leather on chair.

er questioned it for a minute. We all thought, 'We're going to love this, but if we don't, we'll change it in two years' time anyway.'

"The dining room was one of the first things Sean discussed with me," notes Turnbough. "He didn't dine there because he'd never selected chairs for the room." The table, which looks like a free-standing piece, is original to the boat and bolted to the floor. The designers used the same chairs there as those chosen for the aft deck. Since the main goal was to restore

and freshen the space, the original beveled lead-crystal windows were spruced up, and wall sconces dating back to 1926 were cleaned and given new cream silk shades. The chandelier, made from cut shells and broken champagne bottles, was commissioned by Kennedy's parents shortly after they acquired the boat.

In the master stateroom and the five others, the designers removed all additions made after 1930 and restored what remained to its original condition. "Over time, hardware had been damaged and replaced with porcelain," says Turnbough, "so we went back to more traditional boat hardware in brass, nickel and chrome." They kept the décor uniform and used straightforward blue-and-white bedding.

Still, the master stateroom, like the main saloon, has a bit of playfulness. The bedcovering is heavy chenille with rope linking. "It's a wedding bedspread from the forties," explains Bray. "I was in an antiques shop and saw a corner poking out of a box, and I said to the dealer, 'I don't know what it is, but I'll take it.'" The lamps are Italian, circa 1940, and have mahogany bases. The bed and the built-in cabinetry, which were made for the boat, were repainted or given cosmetic touch-ups. The chair in the corner is from Kennedy's mother, who made the canvas draperies. "Decoration-wise, those were the only things Sean wouldn't let us touch," says Schaible. "He said from the beginning they had to stay. And they were

what we really loved. They're sweet and look homemade."

For the designers, the project was a departure. "Since we finished it," says Robert Bray, "we've asked one another, 'What does this look like to other people?' This isn't what we do on a regular basis. The client asked for very little. And our touch was relatively light." Yet the interior evinces a style that is prevalent in their work: clean, uncluttered rooms, free of superfluous detail, that evoke tradition rather than adhering to it. □

"We'd never designed a boat interior before," says Turnbough (opposite above, with Bray, left, and Schaible, right). "It was similar to the restoration of architecture." OPPOSITE: The custom-varnished oak chairs on the aft deck are from Weatherend.

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