



BY MICHAEL PETERS

# SIGHTLINES

## Whale Watching

THE DOOMED PROCESS OF CHASING THE IMMENSELY WEALTHY.



MYSTIC SEAPORT

Chasing "whales" seems to be an annual yacht-design tradition. Got a comment for Michael? Give him a shout at [inbox@pmymag.com](mailto:inbox@pmymag.com).

It's fall and with it comes the annual migration of whales along the coasts of places like Ft. Lauderdale and Monaco. Not to be confused with the blue and gray whales off California or the humpback and finback whales of New England, these whales are harder to spot and sometimes never really sighted by anyone. These are the Las Vegas species, those so large and all consuming that everything in their path falls over and plays dead for them.

About this time of year, just before the major boat shows, brokers and shipyards begin to call. Invariably they have a very wealthy client looking to build a large custom yacht and they need a design proposal to really hook the guy. They are certain it's something we can throw together in an hour or two. They cannot disclose the client's name, but we are assured he is eminently qualified and absolutely going to build a boat. We are told he is Russian, or Chinese, or better yet, a Saudi prince. We are also told that several other designers are submitting proposals for free. Are we in or out?

Mind you, if you call me and want a custom 80-foot yacht, we are going to quote you around \$30,000, just for the preliminary design. This is because you are wealthy, but not really rich. When you go to Vegas or Macau they don't comp you the Presidential Suite, in hopes that you will gamble away a few million bucks.

You are not a whale. Sorry! If you were, we would work for you for free. We know that "90 percent of success is showing up," so we ante up and get into the game mindful not to scare away the client by actually charging him. We are in.

Will we get a chance to meet the client at the boat show? NO. Will we get to talk to him about what he wants in the boat? NO. What we get instead are instructions from the broker who tells us what the project manager told him the captain says the owner is looking for. With this distorted chain of communication we proceed to spend three or four weeks of our own time working out a design that we hope caters to the client's dreams for his superyacht. Where should he sit? Where should he eat? Where does he want to have sex?

So we do our best at working blindfolded and develop a proposal based on what I would want if I were rich. My American middle-class background makes it hard for me to imagine unlimited wealth so I am severely handicapped. I wish I could just talk to the client. I think this is why the British yacht designers are so successful with the really large yachts: They see themselves as equals to their clients, so they have no shame showing them how to spend their gratuitous wealth. However limited I am, my office manages to produce a design we are proud of.

Will I get to make the presentation to the client myself? NO. The broker will take care of that. So onto the stack along with the other proposals goes ours, and they are all given to the project manager, who gives them to the captain, who promises to show them to the owner. My not-so-small investment is now sandwiched between all of the other equally glossy and fantastic images of yachts yet to be. Like advertisements in a magazine, for which he paid nothing, the client is left to casually thumb through the stack of proposals as we live in hope that his finger may fall on ours. Did the king like our basket of goods, or is it off with our heads?

A few weeks pass and the broker tells us nothing. By Thanksgiving the broker is clearly annoyed that we keep calling him. By Christmas we are told that the captain never had a chance to meet with the owner and the owner now has a new girlfriend who hates the ocean, so he no longer wants a new yacht. Game over.

By winter the whales have moved on. But sure as clockwork, come next fall, they will return and we will be ready to sink our harpoon into a really big one given the chance. In the meantime, though, is anyone out there interested in an 80-footer? □