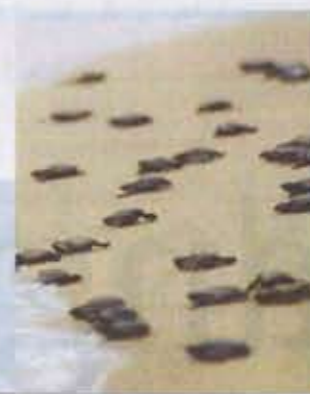




**SMALL NUMBERS, BIG CHALLENGE**  
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# Dreamboat

From luxury yachts to basic sporty models, the country's newfound sailing enthusiasts want to buy them all.

HARSH KABRA

For a growing armada of boaters, the winds certainly seem to be blowing towards India. For a country that built Alec Rose and Robin Knox-Johnston their world-girdling yachts, and gave English important boating terms — Dinghy from the Hindi word *dingi* for a little boat and catamaran from the Tamil word *katumaram* for two logs tied together — that's quite a wind-shift, literally. Because leisure boating in India for long meant small fleets of sailing boats at elite clubs awash in the Raj hangover. But hear some of India's boat manufacturers and marketers relate their sales figures and you'd know why sailing enthusiasm now makes for a grand business opportunity.

"Leisure sailing has gained momentum in India in the last five years," says Aashim Mongia, noted yachtsman and founder of Mumbai-based West Coast Marine that represents Gulf Craft, Dynacraft, Bristol Boats, Al Yousuf Marine, Platinum Super Yachts and other brands. "Infrastructure costs and heavy import duties were once major hiccups. But of late, falling import duties and growing liquidity have brought new entrants to this field."

The leisure, relaxation and sporting merits of our waters are beginning to unravel themselves. The vast, unspoiled shores are enticing upwardly mobile Indians to buy a boat and go cruising.

"India's boat market has caught the attention of foreign manufacturers," says Joe Nejedly of Coimbatore-based Praga Marine, a boat-building pioneer in India. "There's growing global awareness that India's economy is going places and the ranks of high net-worth individuals (HNIs) are swelling." Experts peg the annual growth rate of HNIs alone at over 15 per cent. "Leading names like Italy's Ferretti, US' Bayliner, UK's Princess and Sunseeker, and UAE's Gulf Craft have appointed agents in India," reveals Nejedly. "Besides, some larger luxury boats in the range of 45-55 ft and costing Rs 1-3 crore are also coming to Mumbai."



## Big-ticket sailors

**Liquor and airline tycoon Vijay Mallya** owns a 1906-built 50-metre steam-powered yacht called *Kalizma*, originally purchased by Richard Burton in 1967 as a gift for Elizabeth Taylor. Mallya's other possession is 'Indian Princess', complete with a crew of 15, five guest-rooms, lounge, office, bars, gym, helipad, open-air Jacuzzi, state-of-the-art satellite communication and home theatre systems, jet skis and wind surfers. Industrialist and car-racing enthusiast Gautam Singhania owns a 47-ft yacht called 'Ambassador 47'.

The growing interest in India's boating potential was evident when over 30 international sailing yachts from Europe and Australia touched Mumbai shores in April this year as part of the Vasco Da Gama Rally and later raced with a host of Indian boats up to Goa. The objective, said organisers Drishti Marine Solutions (DMS), a Mumbai-based company that represents brands such as Ferretti, Jeanneau, GC Marine and Sea Ray, was to call attention to India as a yachting destination.

### LEISURE BOATING

Anju Dutta, Director, DMS, says leisure boating in

India is growing steadily. "The India International Boat Show 2006 at Kochi saw a 100 per cent increase in the number of potential buyers and sellers. The number of inquiries for boats has risen sharply in the last couple of years. Last year, 22 craft in different types and sizes were added in Mumbai harbour alone." She adds that their market, negligible until two years ago, is booming now. "While we estimate the industry potential to be \$1,500 million, our own sales projections for the next three years are 50-60 small-to-mid-sized craft and another 10 in the luxury segment."

Nejedly says he has sold 166 Praga Arrow speedboats since they were introduced nearly two decades ago. Close to 40 per cent of these 25-40 hp speedboats, each costing less than Rs 3 lakh, have been bought by individuals and the rest by water sports centres and resorts. The sales of Lancers, the 150-200 hp "starter boats" launched subsequently to prepare HNIs for larger, faster boats, have doubled in the last two years. "We have just finished building our first catamaran sailing yacht, a 16-metre experimental craft, and now intend to commercialise this for the export market." Nejedly says that 95 per cent of India's boat market is with the defence forces, government and ports. "But I expect the leisure market to leap from the present 5 per cent to 15 per cent in the next 2-3 years," he says.

### BOAT OWNER'S PRIDE

Anju says that 90 per cent of all boat owners in India are from Mumbai, some from Goa, Kochi and Chennai, and a minuscule percentage from the hinterland. "Boat buyers come in all ages and from diverse professional backgrounds," she says. "The younger ones want the faster sporty models like the Sea Ray, while the richer, more cultured clients opt for a Ferretti." With most Indian customers having "limited knowledge" about boat the lifestyle, her priority is to orient them. "We slowly guide them in understanding the brands and what they represent."

Expectedly, money is a key consideration. While branded 18-35 ft powerboats could set the buyer back by Rs 12-35 lakh, the likes of Ferretti



come with jaw-dropping Rs 4-25 crore price tags. Anju says that some of the cheaper Gulf brands are doing well currently. "But we feel it's only a matter of time before the Indian customer also starts asking for quality."

A new line of boating freaks, ranging from businessmen to professionals, are driving up the market in the lower segments. As ever, adding to the overall demand are industrial and hospitality majors.

### THE SEA, THE SEA

What continues to be the biggest draw of leisure sailing for most is the sheer exhilaration of bobbing on blue seas, which has inspired the likes of Gulshan Rai, one of the few Indian civilians to have sailed around the world, and Prof V. Radhakrishnan, son of Sir C.V. Raman, who took time off his work at Bangalore's Raman Research Institute to sail across the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans in a trimaran in 1960 and is now readying to set sail in a catamaran built jointly with Nejedly.

"When one steps onto a boat and leaves the shore, it feels as if one has left the hustle and bustle of city life behind," says veteran sailor Gautama

Dutta. "In our busy and stressed cities, a boat is all one needs to find those few hours of peace of mind. The true essence of yachting is being one with the sea, experiencing her moods and allowing her to enrich your psyche with her myriad touches."

Chennai-based Rohini Rau, who studies medicine when she is not winning gold medals at National Laser Radial Championships, says: "Sailing was a hobby initially. Now it's a passion. The adventurous side of sailing is what makes it more addictive. Fearlessness and prime physical condition are the prerequisites. But one also has to follow many technical rules." She got her love for sailing from her mother Aysha Rau, who took to the sport during her long stay in London. Says Aysha, "Yachting is definitely coming into its own in India. It is fast becoming a lifestyle statement." Strangely though, for many in India, a private indulgence is often about public denial: yacht owners declined to speak to this correspondent for fear of attracting undue (read "the taxman's") attention. For the moment though, along with problems of red tape and paucity of infrastructure, awareness and expertise, this doesn't seem to be deterring their romance with the waters.

**Yachting destination:** Many upwardly mobile Indians are ready to buy a boat and go cruising.