

WORKING ON SUPERYACHTS

Part one of this series narrated the initial requirements for working on a superyacht. This month's instalment completes personal recommendations for finding and succeeding in superyacht employment

BY MARIANNE SCOTT



The 274-foot *Savannah* owned by Swedish billionaire Lukas Lundin.



Katarah, owned by the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad, is 408 feet long.



ARATA TANAKA is serving as third chef on *Katarah*, owned by the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad. The 124-metre (408-foot) Lürssen-built yacht carries a helicopter, can host 28 guests in 14 cabins and is rumoured to have cost around US\$300 million. When I spoke with Arata by telephone, he was aboard the yacht somewhere off the coast of Spain, but wasn't allowed to give an exact location for both security and privacy reasons. He couldn't send photos either.

Arata, 45, had been aboard for about eight months and it was his second superyacht job. He'd trained as a sushi chef in his native Japan, but switched to social work serving people with disabilities. "It was satisfying," Arata said, "but after six years I was burned out. So I opted to see the world." Australia, New Zealand and Canada offered visas and he chose Canada, landing in Victoria. Over the next decades, he completed Camosun College's Red Seal Professional Cook course, and then worked at a Japanese restaurant, a high-end restaurant and two bakeries, learning most everything about food preparation.

One day, he met Captain Neil Wood, a former superyacht skipper. "He suggest-

ed I find work on a yacht," Arata said. "I love travel and it sounded enticing. So I went to Fort Lauderdale, took the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) course and looked for work. I contacted yacht employment agencies there, but no luck. I began sweating a bit, fearing I'd run out of money before finding a job."

Eventually, he flew to Antibes in France and immediately visited another employment agency. He thought he'd arrive early in the morning, but by 08:30, more than a dozen people were already queued up. "So many are looking. Each of us was given a 10-minute interview to sell ourselves."

A friend had given me the name of an agency and that was useful. "The company improved my resume and offered a free session for newbies." He took an eight-day trial run on *Haiia*, a 40-metre private yacht with six crew. "It was breakfast, lunch and dinner, starting at 06:00 and ending at midnight for eight days. Afterwards, I revisited the agency and my experience and the new reference allowed me to work on *Katarah* with a crew of 60."

The crew includes 29 nationalities, with

English being the universal language. Seven crew work in the two galleys, spelling each other so they can sleep and rest. Off-season, the cooks work 07:00-19:00, but when the emir and his up to 28 guests are aboard, the schedule runs from 23:00 to 10:00 and again from 14:30 to 18:00. The galley crew do everything: prep, cook, present the food and clean up. Food must be superlative. "After the first two weeks," said Arata, "I felt my brains coming out of my ears. Sometimes things are chaotic. One day I ended up doing lunch and dinner for 60 by myself!"

The food preparation area is massive—with six fridges and walk in freezers. The dry food storage resembles a small shop. "It's part of Qatar's national budget I think."

Despite the demanding job, Arata likes the new adventure, especially the chance to visit exotic places—Spain, France, Greece, Croatia, Italy.

As a recent superyacht employee, Arata offers clear advice on finding a job. "You must like being on the water," he said. "Find a good agent, someone who appreciates your skills. I dressed conservatively. Not to brag, but I'm trim and look younger than my age. That helped >

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a lot. So job applicants, 'cover the tats, lose the piercings.'"

TED MCCUMBER is one of two captains on the 274-foot (83.5-metre) *Savannah*, built by Feadship, launched in 2015 and owned by Swedish billionaire Lukas Lundin. Ted, who owns a home in Point Roberts and spoke to me from Fort Lauderdale while on watch, served as "build captain" during the yacht's 3.5-year construction in the Netherlands.

"I skipper for four months and then switch with the other captain," Ted said. "The yacht is chartered for only six weeks annually, mostly to give the crew of 24 different learning experiences. Some yachts stay mostly in port, serving as the owners' party boats. It's very boring for the crew."

Ted, 56, served two decades as captain of Seaspan's Dennis Washington's *Atessa*, of which there were four versions. He also supervised the yachts' re-



the California State University Maritime Academy in Vallejo, or BCIT. A degree offers faster promotions, prepares you for commercial boating and provides a fall-back position outside the marine world."

What Ted looks for when hiring stewards and chefs is a background in the hospitality or restaurant business. "A big yacht is a moving boutique hotel," he said. "Experience in serving people at all levels counts. And I don't want fly-by-night folks. I need a year's commitment at least. It builds crew cohesion." He tries to find crew recommended by other yacht captains because crew agencies are expensive. "I approve all expenses and must save the owner money when possible, no matter how rich they are."

Since the yacht's launch, she has cruised the Baltic, the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Seychelles, Madagascar and Cuba. Some of these places can be perilous. Although he can't detail security mea-



Savannah was launched in 2015.

fits. Earlier, he worked with Dennis Conner aboard the America's Cup's *Stars and Stripes*. "I was a trimmer and it was great fun," said Ted. "But I needed to make some money and thus set out to obtain a captain's licence." He believes he did it the hard way—working years on commercial boats and gaining more certifications to skipper vessels up to 100 tons. He now has 3,000-ton tickets in the U.S. and the U.K. as well as decades of sea time.

His perspective on superyacht careers is succinct. "Go to a maritime school if you want to be captain," he said. "Spend the years getting a degree. Go to a place like

sures aboard *Savannah*, Ted revealed that many superyachts, including his, now carry armed guards who may be retired Navy Seals, police or special forces.

Four engineers also serve aboard *Savannah*. "We work together," Ted says. "We brainstorm and solve problems. They all have a range of certifications." One of these is chief engineer Peter Boyce, 44. He grew up on Bainbridge Island and got early sea experience as a fishboat deckhand. Fascinated by the mechanics of running a boat, he took courses and earned certifications, gained sea time, and then served aboard multi-

ple superyachts for extended periods, always expanding his expertise. He's been aboard *Savannah* for 14 months and works on a 10-week rotation. His wife, a former stewardess, "understands the demands," Peter said. "For me, it's a rewarding career. I wouldn't do anything else. It's a lifestyle rather than a job and it fits my personality. I like the technical aspects and teaching others. And at my level, it pays very well."

Peter advises that to do his job, you should earn the appropriate certifications, gain sea time, or start off with an engineering degree. "There's a huge demand for engineers. A four-year mech. eng degree offers a head start on a yacht like *Savannah*. Also, today, an electronic technical officer is critical to our team. The systems are so complex and need integration. A good computer guy can start at \$7,000 to \$8,000 a month." Peter sees yacht engineering jobs as challenging, requiring a willingness to learn and follow instructions, while always looking for ways to solve problems.

CAPTAIN ALEX RUURS has found a way to skipper a commercial vessel that acts like a yacht in regional waters. He became a mariner by accident after buying a 25-foot Coronado sailboat in Vancouver, which eventually led to his becoming the deck manager of a Sidney-based boat charter company. "We chartered sail and powerboats between 30 and 60 feet and that's how I really got to know boats." One day, he seized an opportunity to become a deckhand on the *Nautilus Explorer*, a 25-passenger boat offering recreational diving excursions off Mexico. After earning several certifications and years gaining sea time, he became master of the dive boat. He holds a 150GT master ticket and is planning to complete the 500GT soon.

For the past six years, he's skippered the 88-foot *Swell*, a converted 1912 tug now serving as an Inside Passage boutique wilderness cruiser for 12 passengers and a crew of five. "We see First Nation sites, whales, bears and glaciers up close," said Ruurs. Being the master means there's always something new, especially on a small, older boat. "You're navigator, safety officer, plumber, electrician, engine lubricator and sometimes, dishwasher. He partners with first mate Kristina Long (PY December 2016) who has experience serving on superyachts and will also sit for her

Master 500GT this year.

Alex chose to work in B.C./Alaska waters in part to be close to his children. "There's much less income than on big yachts," he said, "but there you're always away. I wanted a life and a life balance."

His most emphatic advice for newcomers is to make sure all your tickets are recognized by other jurisdictions. You can pass a captain's exam but it must be transferable to other countries if you

want to skipper everywhere. A Canadian ticket certified by Transport Canada may not automatically qualify you in all other countries. "Check it out before you take courses and exams."

LOOKS AND ATTITUDE The importance of "looks" came up often during the interviews I conducted. "Although appearance is a small percentage of job requirements, crew must be clean-cut, clean-shaven, >



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neat," crew recruiter Edie Guzman said. "And crew must always be on their best behaviour. They are catering to the beautiful people, the very rich who may have paid \$350,000 for their week's charter and expect to be surrounded and served by attractive people."

Many yachts also stipulate what crew wear; uniforms are common. Fitness is required even for scrubbing decks, running water-sport equipment, or worming your way into the confines of engine rooms.

One chef, 57, with 18 years experience cooking on superyachts, told me she had difficulties finding a job now. "I've aged out of the business," said Rosalind (a pseudonym), "these folks want young fresh things. Yet I've worked for every possible owner and charter, the really rich and famous. I can cook and clean circles around the kids. Offer beautiful food. I know how to solve problems youngsters never experienced. But I wonder if I'll be hired again. Because the sun has wrinkled my face!"

Attitude is all-important. On charters, usually crew don't speak unless spoken to. They must cheerfully carry out "peel-

me-a-grape" type orders. "You should look and act like a Disneyland worker," said Ted McCumber. "Always smiling, even when guests are snarky. Fortunately, most guests are amiable." Dana Glover stated superyacht employment is not for the rebellious. "There's a definite military-like hierarchy. For some it's not easy to do as they're told. To jump when the captain issues an order. But it's necessary. The captain is responsible for a yacht worth tens of millions of dollars and the safety of everyone aboard."

"If your helicopter mom called a professor who gave you a low mark, or when asked to clean the galley floor you begin long-winded negotiations, superyacht work is not for you," said Kristina Long. "You'll be required to work in teams, share a cramped cabin, perform tasks outside your job description, hold your tongue and keep that smile pasted on."

MONEY AND FUN Superyacht work is usually well paid. Tips from guests can run into the thousands after a week's charter. "If you're smart you can save 100 percent of your salary

and tips," said Greg Mosley. "Your room and board, travel and often medical are paid. When you come ashore after a few years, you could have enough to buy a house, pay your university loans, start a business." Ted McCumber agrees. "But," he said, "you must be disciplined. Being among the superrich entice some crew to blow their pay on partying."

"It can be tough to save and not everyone succeeds," added Peter Boyce. "In fact, I've rarely known a deckhand without a \$1,000 watch."

SUPERYACHT EMPLOYMENT offers many non-monetary paybacks. Being on the oceans; meeting people from around the globe—both crew and guests; visiting some of the world's most beautiful and historic places; seeing incredible flora and fauna; experiencing watersports and diving; expanding your horizons; learning teamwork and leadership; building character and honing a work ethic. If you earn the certifications, have the ability and willingness to work hard, this can be a sterling career for you. 



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