

FANTASIES AFLOAT

If it can be done, it can probably be done better on a yacht. That's always been my personal philosophy, and now I discover that somebody's gone and turned it into a business: Lots of Yachts, which will arrange any event you can imagine afloat, from canapes to anchors aweigh.

Sheila Schwartz, owner and founder, plotted a very unlikely course to reach this point. She had earned a master's in social work, and a master's in public administration from the Kennedy School at Harvard. You have to appreciate this. She'd been living in places like Somalia, overseeing various emergency relief efforts, but decided she needed a change. So she washed ashore in Manhattan and bought a barge to live on. Having met numerous yachting types, she began representing them for charters. And the business of planning parties

(events, life ceremonies, whatever you call them) evolved from there.

"My friends think it's funny that I went from all this emergency disaster stuff to yachts," she says over a cappuccino in her ad hoc office at the Peacock Caffe in Greenwich Village. "People spend \$30,000 for one party—that's the budget for 2000 people in Somalia for a year."

After five years, she has a highly eccentric roster of clients. L'Oréal, CBS, Citibank, General Foods, and more have come to her for corporate parties, deal closings, company incentive cruises. There have been movies—she arranged the yachts you saw in *Wall Street* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. She'll arrange cruises for real estate types to inspect shoreline development. Or for an association to cruise up the Hudson, stopping at various historic waterside mansions. Then there are those private clients, like the Pulitzer Prize-winning author (who must be anonymous) who spent eight months planning a cruise for his wife and 40 of her friends to celebrate her 40th birthday. They'll be cruising Long Island Sound, stopping for a custom-guided hike in a nature reserve and other special ship-to-shore excursions. Or Harrison Ford, who chartered *Mariner III* for three months while shooting *Mosquito Coast* because he preferred living

aboard a classic yacht to living in Belize. From every quarter comes the cry: "What we want is something really different."

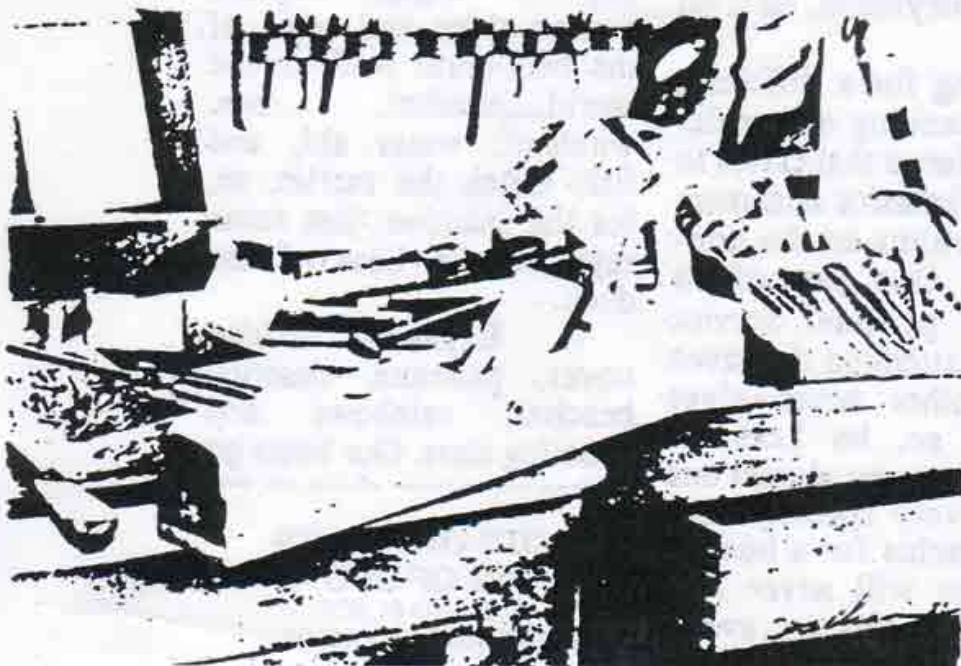
Okay: forget romance for a moment. How about a 350-passenger hydrofoil (one of five in planning)? Schwartz is going to begin running from midtown to Kennedy Airport? Or down to Atlantic City for a day of gambling? She'll arrange special boats and events in the Caribbean (tennis on St. Thomas, sail to St. Croix for golf) and the Mediterranean (Cannes Film Festival extravaganzas, if that's not redundant). Weddings aboard are burgeoning: ceremony, reception and eventually honeymoon, and you only unpack once.

Go ahead: *imagine* something, and she'll put it on a boat. "The thing with this is you have to be creative," Schwartz says, a little out of breath with the effort of keeping ahead of herself. "You have to be open. I'm like a location scout. We rented a plane and flew all over Long Island and Connecticut scouting sites where we could anchor the boat with a 40-room country inn nearby."

But let's face it: it's a business. The romance is for the client, not the vendor. There's plenty of pressure, most recently from corporate clients who want boats to accommodate parties of 600 or more. Groups that size are profitable—though I'm glad to report there aren't many yachts available in the 250-500 passenger range. (Isn't a party that size sort of contrary to the whole idea of a yacht?) And "these young guys from Wall Street" don't seem to get it about boats, either: "They don't know how to unwind."

Schwartz has already turned down a job offer from UNICEF to get back into relieving world stress in a more basic way. In the meantime, though, she's hard at keeping it creative. My favorite: the young woman who dropped \$8000 for a four-hour charter with her boyfriend (lobster, caviar, champagne) to provide the right setting for the Big Question. Of course, *she* was proposing to *him*.

As I say, if you need to get it done, find a yacht.



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