



FORBES Does The Yacht Week: A Seven-Day Party In The Mediterranean



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This story appears in the December 2, 2013 issue of Forbes.



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On an evening in August, at an outdoor club perched just above the lapping waters of the Adriatic Sea on the Croatian island of Hvar, I found William Wenkel hard at work. As a pink sunset lingers on the horizon, the 33-year-old CEO of [European Travel Ventures](#) dutifully lifts a 4.5 liter bottle of vodka for the guests at his private table, which tonight include a Silicon Valley venture capitalist, a Los Angeles musician and a smattering of Swedish friends and business partners. Next to us a Turkish university student is spraying magnum after magnum of champagne onto the crowd of 400 international partygoers below. A dozen women in bikinis and tank tops dance to chest-thumping electronic music on the surrounding benches. As Wenkel shakes my hand for the first time, he gestures to the crowd and yells into my ear: "Imagine doing this for 12 weeks in a row!"



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Welcome to The Yacht Week, a 7-day tour of select seaside locales that Wenkel's company offers for three months in the Mediterranean every summer, before moving on to Thailand (December) and the British Virgin Islands (in December and March) come winter. The idea is simple, and for twentysomethings of a certain inclination and income, irresistible: A week with friends on a sailboat, complete with a skipper, a sampling of idyllic ports and a roster of all-night, and occasionally all-day, parties. For about \$750 per person, groups of friends book a boat online and join an armada of up to 50 other boats crewed by participants from around the world. (An equal male-to-female ratio is strictly enforced.) It's a bit like spring break, but geared toward young professionals with means.

On week eleven of the summer season, I joined the flotilla for The Yacht Week's most popular route, the southern islands of Croatia just off the coast of the city of Split. The company operates simultaneous events in Italy and Greece during the summer, but it's in these waters that Wenkel and his cofounder and COO, Erik Biörklund, first came up with the idea while skippering sailboats for European families on holiday in 2005. "It was such an awesome job to be a skipper," reminisces Biörklund, 32, a Nordic archetype with blue eyes and windswept blond hair. "You hang around on a boat at these beautiful places, but the clientele was always family-based. The only thing missing was good friends."



William Wenkel and Erik Biörklund are steadily building a travel business empire. (Credit: Michael Amme)

So he and Wenkel convinced their charter company to reserve ten boats for their buddies the next summer.

Both were completing degrees back in their native Sweden at the time, and they spent the winter promoting the trip at their universities. By spring they had recruited 254 people to fill 27 boats for a week of sailing in August. "I had like 175,000 Euros going through my private bank account," remembers Wenkel. "I said, 'Never again.'"

Yet Wenkel, who sports a trimmed, ruddy beard and a roguish sense of humor—he once staged his own deportation from Croatia, complete with the complicity of the Swedish consul, the local police and an unhinged business partner, as a prank for Biörklund’s 30th birthday—soon ate his words. “The main thing was that it was very fun,” he admits and word of the event spread in Sweden. The two organized a trip with 57 boats the next year, still treating the concept as little more than a well-organized holiday. When the event swelled to 95 boats in 2008 they decided that they might have a business on their hands.

Today their London-based company rents out 1,100 boats to 9,000 customers each year, bringing in \$9 million in sales. Nearly a fifth of their clientele comes from the U.S., but the rest hail from 60 different countries, including Egypt, India, Chile and the Philippines. (Just 1.6% are from Sweden.) The average age is 27, and though the trip is reasonably priced, attendees tend to be well-moneyed types. There are business school students and bankers from the U.S., well-heeled South American en route to Ibiza and Oxford graduates letting off steam.

Wenkel started two companies and spent a year as an artillery officer in the Swedish navy before starting The Yacht Week, while Biörklund previously worked as a project manager at a Swedish media conglomerate. The two like to emphasize those backgrounds during business dealings. “It’s important for us not to be ‘the party organizers,’” Wenkel explains, with an accent that often sounds more British than Swedish. On the ground though, it’s easy to see why some might make take a different view. A promotional YouTube video for The Yacht Week went viral in 2009, featuring scenes of the young and beautiful behaving badly in a paradise of Mediterranean sun, yachts and seaside parties. The reality does not fall short.



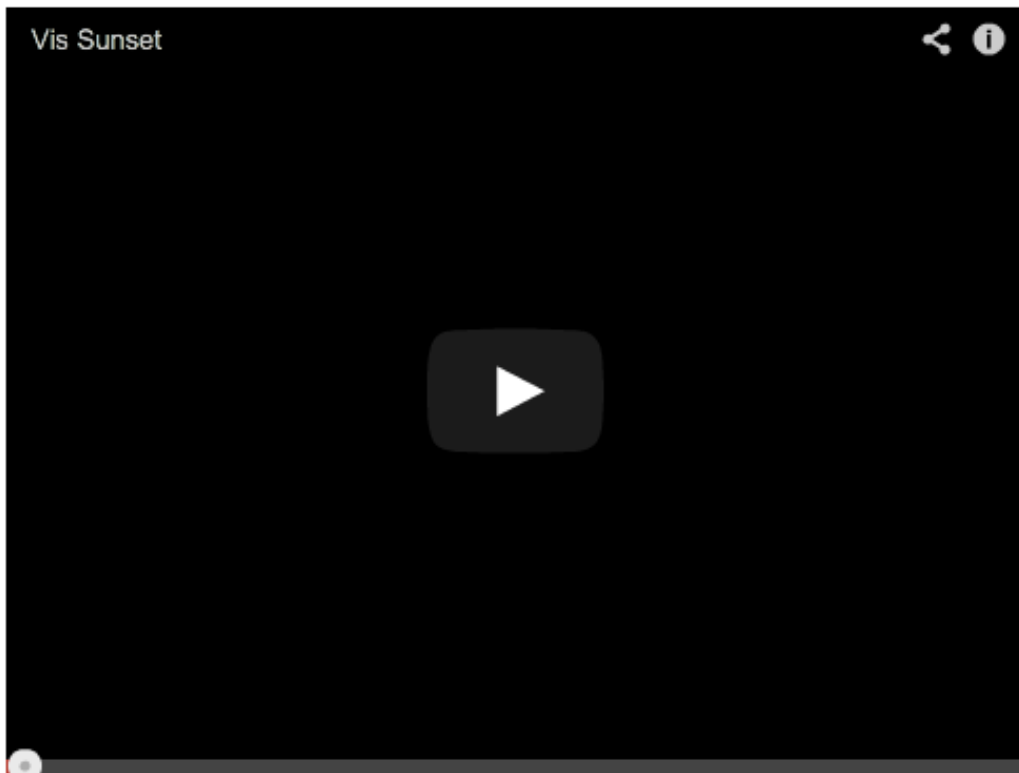
For the first night of my trip, the company took over a portside club in the town of Trogir. Though few people left until after 3 a.m., and an ambulance arrived for one partygoer who fell off a table dancing, multiple crew members assured me that this would be the most low-key night of the trip. They were correct. The next day included the sunset party on Hvar, followed by a 2 a.m. boat trip to a beachside club on a small island. On day three the “crew-boat party” packed all 400 attendees onto the deck of an old wooden frigate beginning at two in the afternoon. Despite the early hour, the music still blared and champagne still showered from above. (Video below.)



Boats are generally 45-50 feet long and fit nine people on average. Waking up in the cramped, rocking sleeping quarters of a sailboat, especially after a long night out, isn't exactly luxurious, but the morning views of Mediterranean ports and azure water do provide consolation. Mornings—or afternoons, depending on the previous night—often start with a quick swim and a short sail to the next port.

For daytime activities there is, say, cliff-jumping off World War II-era submarine silos on the island of Vis. Another popular pastime involves hanging off a rope attached to the mast of a sailboat. When the skipper turns the craft suddenly, the jumper launches out onto the open water. It's perfectly safe until customers forget to let go and come crashing back into the boat. (An infrequent but not unheard of occurrence.) On some days all 50 yachts tie together in a "raft," and guests break out inflatable lounge chairs and water guns and hop boat-to-boat to find the best party. Wenkel and Biörklund, who have spent eight years catering to such crowds, dart in and out of the festivities according to their moods, occasionally taking a boat full of friends to more secluded locales to avoid the bedlam.

And, as their own tastes change, the two are eyeing a different clientele. Last year the company secured a 25-year lease on Fort George, a 19th century Croatian citadel built by the British during the Napoleonic Wars. Wenkel can barely hide his childlike pride in the place, which sits high on a peninsula, overlooking two natural bays on the island of Vis, one of the country's least developed islands. The company is spending \$1 million, funded out of profits, on a two-year restoration to turn the property into an events space and cultural hub, complete with an in-house chef and historian, a wine cellar and art exhibitions. (Below, a view of the sunset from the fort.)



A Vice Admiral of the British Royal Navy gave a speech at the fort's grand opening in September, followed by similarly formal remarks from his Croatian counterparts. Even the Croatian president is lending his name to the project. The effect has been soothing for a company known for drawing a young, raucous crowd to Croatia's shores. "Now they take us more seriously because it's more in-line with the kind of tourists they want," observes Biorklund.

Some nights at least. The Yacht Week still takes over the fort for two nights each week during the summer, bringing with it the throbbing music and masses of restive partygoers. "There's something common about young people all over the world," Wenkel smirks. "Everyone says, 'Let's have a quiet night.' But it never happens."