

## PRINCESS EMMA

I am ankle-deep in plush white carpet. It's like I'm getting a foot massage from thousands of very expensive, very friendly, soft-haired worms. It's very nice. Problem is, I don't know where to step from here; I am concerned I will somehow leave a permanent dent in the soft floor-covering underfoot.

I am onboard a luxurious 85-foot (25-metre), 78-ton motor yacht. The *Emma*, built by the UK's Princess Yachts and moored in the South of France until late last year, is a gargantuan of good taste that is now based at Cape Town's V&A Waterfront.

According to the publicity material, *Princess Emma* is 'the largest and most prestigious luxury motor yacht available for charter in South Africa'. Successful businesspeople, homegrown celebrities and government representatives have cruised on the *Emma*. It is also a popular location for fashion and film shoots.

'Please take off your shoes,' Maxine Steenkamp, operations manager, softly orders, before I step inside. I should have worn my good socks. I tentatively enter a watercraft wonderland.

To my left, oh-so-comfortable couches beckon. To my right, a huge flatscreen TV slides up out of a bench. Cool. Onboard entertainment includes DVD, CD and MP3 players equipped with surround sound, so no matter where you are sitting or lying down, you'll be able to hear Lily Allen (the CD I spy in the wheelhouse later), *7de Laan* or the rugby.

We move further into the homely heart of the *Emma* to the galley and dining area. The galley, Maxine tells me, has a stove, oven, microwave, coffee machine, ice-maker, dishwasher – 'everything you need'. It certainly looks impressive, though I'm no expert. 'You can cook up a storm in here.' I suspect she'd drop the word 'storm' from sentences when describing the galley to actual paid-up clients.

The wheelhouse is a dizzying array of controls, switches and buttons; state-of-the-art navigation, communications and safety equipment. Just looking at the vast control panel gives me a migraine. This is why captaining a vessel such as the *Princess Emma* is best left to highly trained, very experienced professionals, such as skipper Russel Matchette.

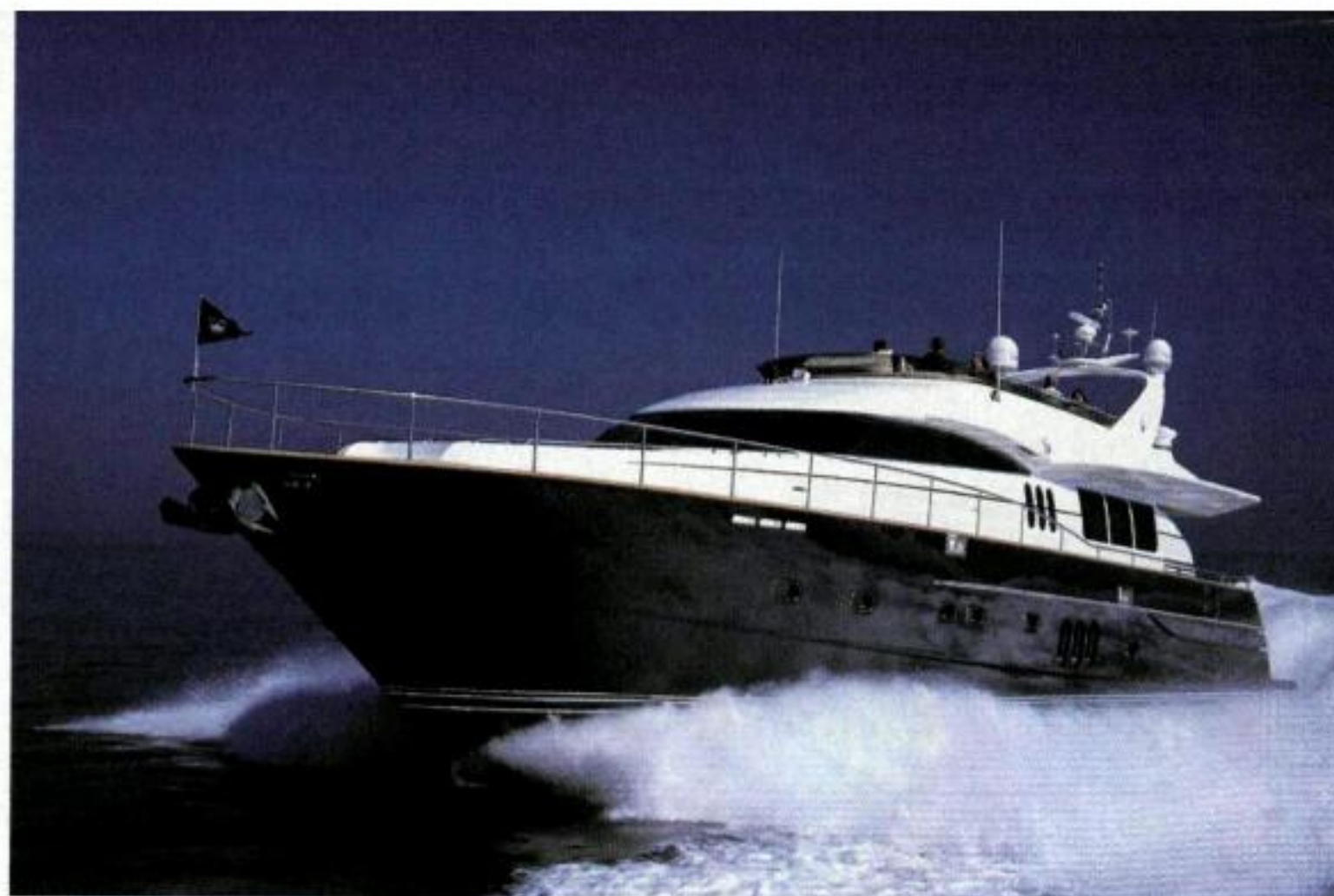
I chance it anyway. 'You don't mind if I take it for a drive?' I am only partly joking.

Maxine baulks. Her face whitens slightly at the prospect of a land-lubbing journalist taking her beloved yacht – worth about R45 million new – for a lap of the harbour and bumping into something. Say, for instance, the Waterfront.

She chokes back a laugh, offers a polite smile and gently shakes her head: No. It was worth a try.

Maxine, a true professional, pretends I never asked anything so stupid and leads me below to show me the four en-suite cabins. They are all independently air-conditioned and they are all glorious; cherry oak finishes, rosewood panelling, sleek surfaces, tasteful fabrics. The main cabin has a massive granite-finish bath. Guests will have to fight over who gets dibs for use of that. Bunk beds – for the kiddies, really – are easily unfolded from the walls of the other three cabins.

*Princess Emma* has a 12-guest capacity but it's most comfortable with eight. 'Basically, it's a guesthouse on the water,' Maxine says – a guesthouse whose twin 2 000hp engines can power it to a top speed of 34 knots (63km/hour). Privacy is not an issue onboard as the crew – skipper Matchette, Maxine and deckhand Albert – are on hand only as long as you want them to be. However, swift service is a mere phonecall away: there are phones in every bedroom.



ABOVE No cabin fever onboard *Princess Emma*, where the beds are big and the rooms air-conditioned; (top) originally from the South of France, *Emma* now motors around the southern tip of Africa OPPOSITE (left) A catamaran cruiser is perfect for island-hopping in the Indian Ocean; (right, top) the interior of the *Outeniqua* is made with indigenous Knysna forest woods; (right, bottom) *MG1* awaits its next adventure in Durban harbour PREVIOUS PAGE All this could be yours: the largest luxury yacht available for charter in South Africa

Up on the large, covered flybridge, as well as another helm – always important – there is a bar (basin, barbecue, fridge, ice-maker) and dining area. If guests are feeling particularly lazy, they can stretch out on the sunbeds on the flybridge and foredeck. Though I have a strong urge, I am a professional and I do not.

The wide aft deck can be used for whale- or dolphin-spotting or a spot of alfresco dining. There is a four-metre tender boat and jet skis, and a dive off the swimming platform is not out of the question. I also ignore that urge.

Maxine is very protective of her 'baby'. 'I love the ocean, I love my job. But I'm very fond of this boat – and I get stressed about people not having respect for it.'

**TAKE YOUR PICK** Charters range from day trips (cruise along the Atlantic coast for lunch at Hout Bay harbour, return via Clifton for sundowners and dinner onboard) to five-day journeys (tailor-made Southern Cape coast cruises to Knysna).

**COST** Mid-season rates (April, Sept, Oct, Nov 2009) are two hours (minimum) R22 500; overnight (24 hours), R50 000.

**CONTACT** The Last Word Luxury Yacht Charter, 079-348-0447, 021-794-6561; thelastwordluxuryyachtcharter.com