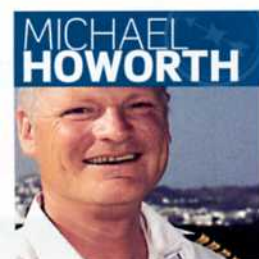


Forever blowing bubbles

THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE IS HOW GREAT IDEAS HAPPEN AND SOMETIMES, IN BOATING, IT'S THE CRAZIEST IDEAS THAT MAKE SENSE

MICHAEL HOWORTH REPORTS



Highly experienced, captain Michael Howorth has commanded a number of significant superyachts and written extensively on the subject

It is always interesting to speculate on what will be the next big thing in superyachting. It is, after all, one area of the world's economy where money does not seem to be the limiting factor, a rarefied world that appears to offer seemingly endless horizons.

One recent example of an extraordinary idea, that might forever change the way we think, is the SkySail.

Rob Humphries, a young and exciting UK-based designer from Lyminster, near Southampton, has teamed up with the Hamburg, Germany-based company SkySail to produce designs for a trimaran yacht that will be partly powered by wind — yet has no mast. The system developed by the German firm is in effect a giant kite (up to 320m²) and, according to SkySail, can reduce, under optimal wind conditions, fuel usage by up to 50 per cent.

It means that finally the novel and environmentally friendly concept of using the wind to assist a motoryacht may no longer be a pipe dream. The SkySail has also generated great interest in the commercial shipping world and hopefully over the coming years someone might develop one for a superyacht. The

was it borne from the idea of the hovercraft. In 1964 Basil Hurl-Hobbs first put forward the idea and six years later he conducted successful trials of such a craft inside Chichester Harbour, in the south of England.

Plans for a larger craft with commercial capabilities were sadly shelved when Hurl-Hobbs died in 1972.

During 1986 there were suddenly press reports that the navies of NATO were collaborating on a twin-hulled Surface Effect Ship with the code name SES-200.

It was reported that by pumping air downwards a fast corvette-sized patrol boat could provide a more stable ride in high seas that achieved aboard a single hull warship.

Cushions of air

The idea seems to have disappeared from the radar in recent times and even if it is still in development no one is talking about it.

The Dutch have always been highly inventive when it comes to watercraft so it was no surprise to me when I read that the concept was being given new life. The DK group in the Netherlands has come up with a new twist to the concept. Instead of raising the vessel above the surface they have realised that it would be more effective to simply insert a layer of air between the hull and the environment in which she floats. Pumping a carpet of air around the hull will, the DK Group claims, cut drag, reduce friction and thus require less power for similar speed, and, in theory, can help reduce fuel consumption and carbon emissions by up to around 15 per cent.

Tank tests using scale models have been so successful that a full set of sea trials of the Air Cavity System are about to be conducted in Holland. The trials will be conducted using a commercial vessel with a hull that has been modified to make space for the air that will be trapped inside a steel skirt to stop the bubbles popping up to the surface.

The proposed ship is a small oil tanker of around 90m (295ft) long — or, as you and I might call it, superyacht size. ●

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system can be relatively easily retrofitted according to the company's website.

Another example of eccentric brilliance is the revolutionary concept of cruising on a carpet of air in a bid to reduce fuel consumption and cut carbon emissions.

The idea is not new — nor, as you might suppose,