



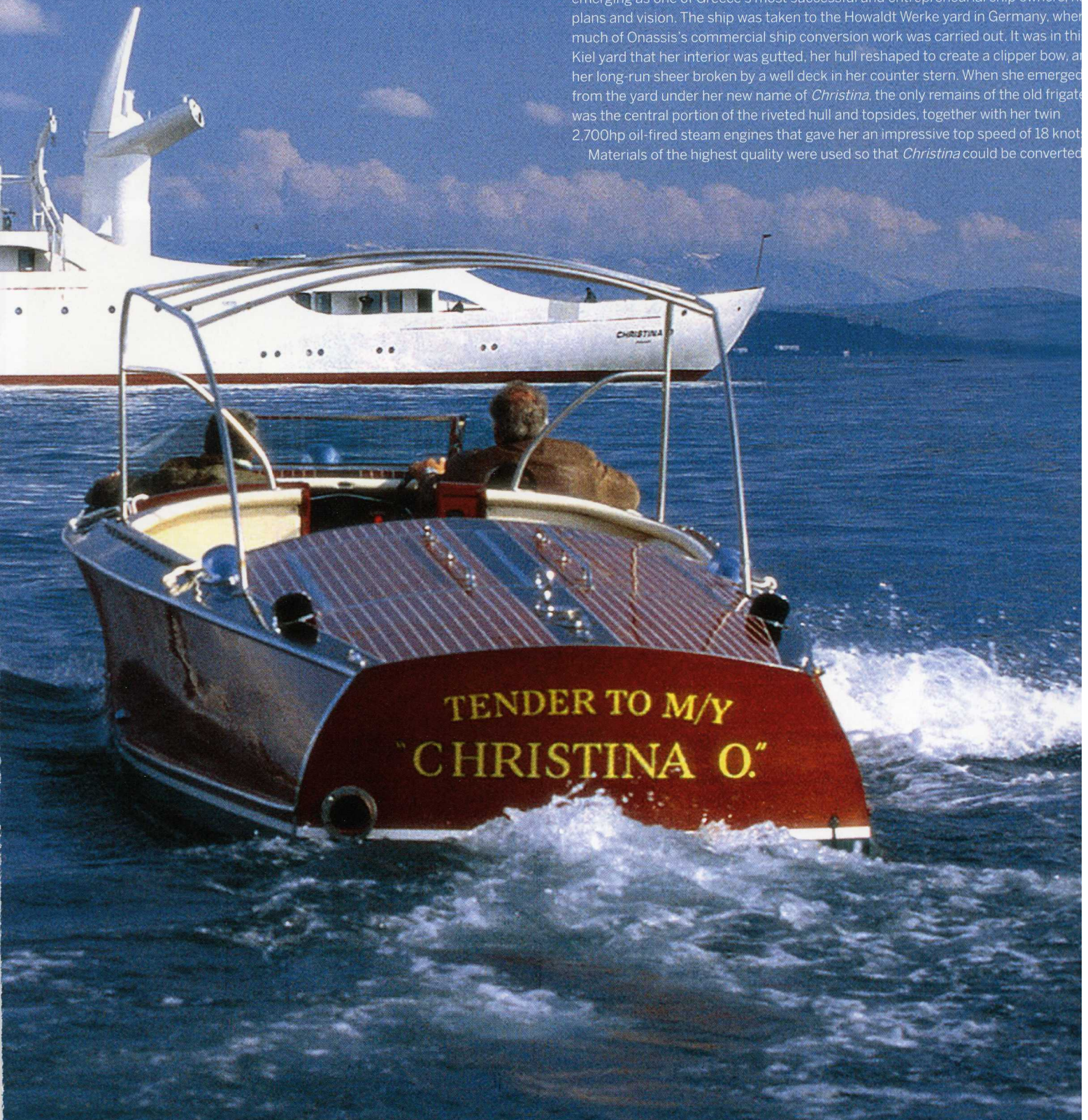
Christina O

Christina O is one of the great superyacht survivors, a veteran of one world war and two brushes with the breakers. Now fully restored a second time, she rightly takes her place at the top table of today's charter yachts. Frances & Michael Howorth

Ari's Bar, with its stools said to be covered in leather cured from the foreskins of sperm whales, is one of the most exclusive watering holes on earth. The same can be said of the exotic mosaic-bottomed swimming pool just a few yards away that converts to a dance floor in the evening. Graced by the great and the good over the years, they belong not to some exclusive downtown hotel but to one of the world's most famous superyachts, *Christina O*. From the 1950s onwards she was often in the news as the plaything of Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, one of the great self-made men of the 20th Century, whose romantic intrigues and family affairs captivated the world.

But the yacht's early days weren't nearly so glamorous: she was constructed during World War II as a 1,724-tonne River class frigate for the Royal Canadian Navy. As HMCS *Stormont* she saw service guarding and escorting merchant ships during the Battle of the Atlantic and in support of the D-Day landings. In November 1945 she was decommissioned and sold off as scrap for \$34,000. But Onassis, who was emerging as one of Greece's most successful and entrepreneurial ship owners, had plans and vision. The ship was taken to the Howaldt Werke yard in Germany, where much of Onassis's commercial ship conversion work was carried out. It was in this Kiel yard that her interior was gutted, her hull reshaped to create a clipper bow, and her long-run sheer broken by a well deck in her counter stern. When she emerged from the yard under her new name of *Christina*, the only remains of the old frigate were the central portion of the riveted hull and topsides, together with her twin 2,700hp oil-fired steam engines that gave her an impressive top speed of 18 knots.

Materials of the highest quality were used so that *Christina* could be converted





Onassis used her to host STARS and some of the world's most POWERFUL and INFLUENTIAL people



into a ship suitable for royalty. No solution was too good. A seaplane, stored on deck and lifted by a crane, meant quick and easy access to and from the vessel, and an open-top Fiat 500 roadster provided guests with transport once ashore. Nine further tenders, including a glass-bottomed boat for sightseeing, ensured that guests were never bored.

Shipping heiress Tina Livanos, who was Onassis's first wife, said: "The yacht is his real passion. He is like a housewife fussing over it, constantly looking to see that everything is impeccable." Not that it stopped him wooing other women when on board. In fact he had something of a track record for falling in love on *Christina*, and clearly loved the yacht with the same passion he had for the ladies. A crew member once explained: "You could smash a \$20,000 speedboat into pieces and not a word would be said by the boss, but spit on *Christina's* deck and you were out of a job."

Onassis named the yacht *Christina* after his only daughter. He used the boat as his home – she could be seen frequently gracing the quay at Monaco or at anchor off his private island of Skorpios in the Ionian Sea. Designed to entertain and impress his guests, *Christina* played host to some of the world's most powerful and influential people. Royalty, presidents and prime ministers were joined by captains of industry and film stars. The guest list reads like a *Who's Who* of post-war noteworthies: Sir Winston Churchill, JFK, the Aga Khan, King Farouk of Egypt, King Faud of Saudi Arabia, Eva Peron, John Paul Getty, John D. Rockefeller, John Wayne, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, Rudolph Nureyev, Adlai Stevenson, Maria Callas, and Richard

Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. The yacht was also used for two of the world's most high profile marriages: Prince Rainier of Monaco to Grace Kelly; and Onassis himself to the former US first lady Jackie Kennedy. It's no wonder *Christina* was featured so heavily in the world's press as Onassis frequently dropped a discreet word to bring the paparazzi running, realising that the coverage would do his business a world of good.

Onassis died in 1975 and at his funeral the yacht lay off the island of Skorpios with her ensign at half-mast; it was to be her last day of dignity for some time. His daughter Christina had little interest in her father's fabulous ship and three years after his death gave her away to the Greek government as a gift. The government renamed her *Argo* and declared she would become the country's presidential yacht, but in reality they were embarrassed by her opulence and had little use for her. So she lay unloved, discarded and frequently looted at the Greek naval base of Salamis.

Twelve years later the government tried to sell the dilapidated yacht for US\$16 million but no one was willing to stump up such a huge amount for a yacht that would devour multiples of that to put her back to her former glory. The price dropped year on year until she was eventually sold to American Alexander Blastos for \$2.2 million. But even that episode ended unhappily: Blastos was not what he claimed, the \$220,000 deposit cheque bounced, and he was later imprisoned in the US for fraud.

The yacht remained the property of Greece and continued to languish in the seed backwaters of Salamis, but salvation was to come. Twenty years of neglect would normally finish off a less substantial yacht but this lady is built of stronger stuff. John



Above: Burton and Taylor aboard in 1974. Aristotle (smoking) and Jackie Onassis (right) look on.
Facing page top: *Christina O* has a fine array of toys and a crew of 36.
Facing page: *Christina O's* Onassis suite, and stunning spiral stairs.
Left: Winston Churchill was a regular guest aboard *Christina*, and is cruising here up the Hudson River in 1961.



*She offers an exhilarating mix of
LUXURIOUS LIVING with
adventure ashore and afloat*



Photos: Roger Viollet, Getty Images



Facing page: Monaco, 1959
— Churchill talks with
Onassis's first wife Tina.
Maria Callas (right) looks
on with her then husband
Gian-Battista Meneghi.
Aristotle is seated far left.

Top: relaxing on the
sundeck.

Above and right: lapis
lounge and Ari's bar.





Paul Papanicolaou, a Greek graduate of Columbia University, had learned his trade in ship management in the New York offices of the Greek Livanos Shipping group. Now a ship owner himself he purchased the yacht and set about the restoration. The refit work started where she stood in Salamis: her interior was gutted, and important features were salvaged and placed in storage for later use.

The original steam engines were removed and she was renamed in tribute to her previous owner as *Christina O*. Once seaworthy, she made the voyage under tow through the Corinth Canal to the Adriatic and the Victor Lenec yard in Rijeka, Croatia, where the main rebuilding was undertaken by a myriad of specialist subcontractors. The naval architect Costas Carabelas was put in charge and he worked closely with interior stylist Apostolos Molindris.

Papanicolaou wanted to restore the yacht to her original state in a style that Onassis would have approved of. However, the two rebuildings were 45 years apart and many modern amenities and safety features had now to be incorporated. Aristotle had spent \$4 million in 1954 – equivalent to \$27 million in 1999. Her new owners were to spend over double that before they saw their dream turn to reality. Such is the nature of refitting old vessels that time and cost estimates spiral upwards. Inevitably, one by one, problems are uncovered. There were serious surprises around every corner of *Christina O*, but the owners never lost hold of their vision. An initial survey had estimated that 20% of the hull plating needed replacing; in the dry dock in Croatia that increased to more than 50%. All the under water steelwork, including

keel and double bottom tank tops, had to be renewed. She was originally due to spend just two months in dry dock but she ended up being there for almost a year. *Christina O* was now a much stronger ship with over 560 tonnes of new 5in steel plate replacing the original 4in hull. After 16 months, 56 miles of new wiring, 140 tonnes of pipework and a total of 1.2 million hours of labour, *Christina O* was finally ready.

The huge engineroom is now dominated by two new six-cylinder diesels. These two 2,775hp MAN engines deliver more power than the original steam engines, driving her to 19 knots. A generator room, located beneath the floor of the control room, has three 470kW generators. New areas required to meet passenger ship regulations have been added, so *Christina O* now boasts incinerators and heavy-duty waste shredders plus a galley with dedicated specialist pot-washing rooms and four massive pantries.

In contrast to her former life, *Christina O* hasn't remained one man's personal toy; she supports herself by chartering to the world's discerning clientele. She can carry up to 36 passengers, and complies with stringent SOLAS regulations for passenger ships. Nineteen staterooms were created, including a stunning master suite, and there is a one-to-one passenger-crew ratio.

She offers a huge volume within five enclosed decks. Guests have use of vast open spaces high up on the compass deck forward of the funnel, furnished with steamer-style teak sunloungers and a bar. The open deck areas are much the same as they were during the yacht's heyday – the places where Onassis and Maria Callas carried out their affair as the world looked on. The original swimming pool commissioned by

Specifications

LOA: 99.14m (325ft 3in)
 Beam: 11.13m (36ft 6in)
 Draught: 4.27m (14ft 0in)
Construction: Steel hull/aluminium superstructure
Displacement: 2,250 tonnes
Year built: 1942
Yard: Vickers Canada
Engines: Twin 2,750hp MAN
Top speed: 19 knots

Range: 5,000 miles
Current base: South of France and Italy
Charter rates: €45,000 per day for up to 12 guests; €55,000 per day for 13-24 guests; and €65,000 per day for 25-36 guests
Charter enquiries:
 Camper & Nicholson's Monaco
 Tel: +377 97 97 77 00
 Email: info@mon.cnryachts.com
 Website: www.cnconnect.com



Onassis with its copy of the ancient mosaic of the Minoan bull and gymnast from the palace at Knossos has been lovingly restored, the bottom of which can still be raised flush to the deck by electric motors to serve as a dance floor. One deck up, the promenade boasts a new Jacuzzi, bar and a dining area for 50.

Because the new engines are so much smaller, the designers used the extra space to create an additional dining area, as well as a gym. She now has four saloon-like guest areas, two on the main deck and two on the promenade deck, as well as a music lounge. The aftermost main deck saloon, known as the lapis lounge, together with the adjoining Ari's bar, is probably the most famous spot on board. This hideaway was the favourite spot of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. It is lined in oak with iroko panelling beneath a white-beamed deckhead. Onassis's famous lapis-lazuli-trimmed fireplace remains in place.

Less celebrated but equally fascinating for classic yacht enthusiasts are the original mooring bollards and winches on the aft deck. The mast here has been enlarged to serve as the yacht's main engine exhaust, rather than the yellow funnel, which now houses the emergency generator, air-conditioning units and battery rooms. Crewing the bridge, galleys, service areas and machinery spaces aboard *Christina O* has more

in common with the workings of a merchant vessel than a yacht. It's all managed by the captain and his 35 crew of nine officers and 25 ratings, who work a formal watch-keeping roster that won't be readily recognisable to the majority of today's smaller, more informally managed superyacht crews.

As *Christina* she was a grand lady, and now thanks to her new owner's passion and perseverance her days of dignity have returned. Rebuilt and renamed *Christina O*, she is still arguably the most famous yacht in the world, and a star in her own right. Now available for charter through Camper & Nicholson's, who act as the yacht's central agent, she has in recent years hosted celebrities including Paul McCartney and Tommy Lee of Motley Crue, and the late Anna Nicole Smith.

Certainly she is a delight to her current owners who say: "She offers her passengers an exhilarating mixture of luxurious living, gourmet cuisine, with adventure ashore and afloat. Into this is interwoven that legendary spirit of romance created by Aristotle, who would have been proud of the rebuilt yacht." It seems that in the hands of her new owners the future of *Christina O* is once again secure and she can look forward to gracing the seas every bit as gloriously and grandly as she did in the past. SYW

floor of *Christina O's* pool rises up electronically to form a dance area.
 Below: The piano lounge.
 Bottom: Aristotle Onassis in the early 1960s standing before his pride and joy.



1943 HMCS Stormont

Built by Vickers in Montreal for anti submarine work with the Royal Canadian Navy



1951 Christina

From a warship to a private yacht that captured the world's imagination



1974 Argo

Gifted to the Greek government after Aristotle Onassis's death, she fell into gradual decay



2001 Christina

Thoroughly restored and replated, a new queen of the charter fleet

