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Personal submarines are making nautical waves

By John Bray

With more than 350 yachts sold in 2013 and less than one-third of those being “superyachts”—vessels greater than 40 to 50 meters—the yacht market is small, but significant. In 2013, asking prices exceeded \$3.5 billion and 2014 values have already passed \$2.5 billion, according to *Boat International*. But owning a yacht simply to own a yacht is becoming increasingly uncommon as many owners are looking to stand out by offering something truly unforgettable to their guests. Fortunately, visionaries in this nautical niche were ahead of the trend and are already building the next exclusive experience.

Thirty years ago that experience involved personal helicopters. Existing yachts were retrofitted with helipads, and yacht designers began presenting applicable options. Today, helipads are common and designers everywhere have their eye on the next big thing: personal submarines. There are already several options in this 10-year-young market, but the number of companies offering exceptional design and reliable construction is still fairly small.



Triton Personal Submarine



Triton Submarines, LLC, in Vero Beach, Florida, has been a prominent name in the market since its founding in 2007. In fact, Triton delivered its first submarine in 2006 before the company officially launched. That Triton 1000/2 submarine, still active today, "... has done hundreds and hundreds of dives and it's in beautiful, like-new condition," says Marc Deppe, vice president of sales and marketing at Triton. A lot has changed since then, but quality is still paramount. Today, Triton combines sophisticated design and engineering into a tender-garage-ready package and produces 11 models that can accommodate up to eight passengers, including a two-person submarine capable of diving deeper than one mile. But Triton isn't alone in the market.

The Netherlands-based U-Boat Wox B.V. has been manufacturing yacht-worthy submarine options since its founding in 2005. From founder Bert Houtman's personal designs in the 1980s to the six production models offered today, U-Boat understands the needs of the market and its exclusive clientele. "We build the submarines in small series," says Erik Hasselman, commercial director for U-Boat. "We can provide really high-quality product at an excellent price with the right amount of support and training." That quality includes an array of interior and exterior customization options for a truly personalized submarine. But both companies face similar challenges regarding deployment from today's yachts.



U-Boat Personal Submarine

"Submarines, by nature, are quite heavy and large," says Hasselman, "so not every yacht can carry a submarine ... and that's where shadow boats come in." For current yacht owners facing a substantial retrofit to accommodate a submarine, a shadow boat—separate vessels designed specifically to carry recreational "toys" including boats, helicopters, and submarines—can be a good alternative. These submarines can weigh as much as 17,600 pounds and require advanced lift systems for deployment, but shadow boats avoid retrofitting entirely. Alternately, with naval architects and designers now considering submarines in their designs, new yachts won't face this issue. And that's significant because yachts control the market.

"The number of yachts that exist in the global fleet that are either under build, have been built, or are in design dictates the overall scope of the market," says Deppe, estimating that only about 1 percent of today's superyachts are capable of carrying a submarine with minimal retrofitting. Though yacht-based submersibles are not overly expensive—Triton models are \$1.5 to \$5 million; U-Boat models are \$2.4 to \$3 million—that cost doesn't include retrofitting or shadow boats. While some yacht owners may choose to take on the additional expense, it's not ideal. Fortunately, both Triton and U-Boat continue to be forward thinking and, as a result, both now offer an option that skirts this challenge while, Deppe notes, increasing the market by up to five times.

Triton's 1000/3 LP ("Low Profile")—officially announced at the 2014 Monaco Yacht Show in September—and U-Boat's Super Yacht Sub 3 each weigh just over 7,600 pounds and stand only 5.6 feet tall. Both accommodate a pilot and two passengers and can dive to 1,000 feet. These new models were released this summer, and their height and weight specifications make them ideal for easy yacht-based deployment while still providing an unbeatable experience, which, in this market, is everything.



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“Yachts used to be a platform for entertainment,” says Deppe. “Now they’re becoming a much more experiential platform.” Yes, yachting is an experience, but taking guests beneath the surface is truly unique. By Deppe’s estimate, there are only approximately 20 to 30 manned personal submarines in the world today, meaning they’re exclusive as well. But considering the cost of a yacht isn’t anything to scoff at, a \$5 million dollar add-on—at the highest end—isn’t unreasonable. Then again, those thinking about a new yacht entirely could consider more than submarine-friendly construction.

Yacht-based submarines offer unique experiences and yachts are stunning on their own, but an underwater yacht is something completely different. U.S. Submarines, the parent company of Triton and the creative minds behind the upcoming Poseidon Undersea Resort, embraces that difference. Though customization is available, their largest stand-alone submarine, the Phoenix 1000, comes standard with over 5,000 square feet of livable space and an \$80 million price tag. However you look at it, a “supersub” is in a class all its own. But it’s all a matter of preference.

Whatever nautical option is most appealing, one thing is certain: submarines are here to stay. Naval architects and shipyards embraced the shift, Triton Submarines and U-Boat Worx have proven their expertise and other companies are sure to surface, and all eyes are on the world’s yacht owners. “It’s not the money, it’s not the safety, it’s not the space and weight limitations anymore,” says Hasselman. “It’s just whether [yacht owners] like to see stuff on the water that no one has ever seen before.” Or, in the case of the world’s “supersub” owners, it’s whether or not they want to be seen at all. So perhaps the next big thing isn’t what people can see, but what they can’t see that will distinguish between traditional yacht owners and those with more exclusive, adventurous tastes.

