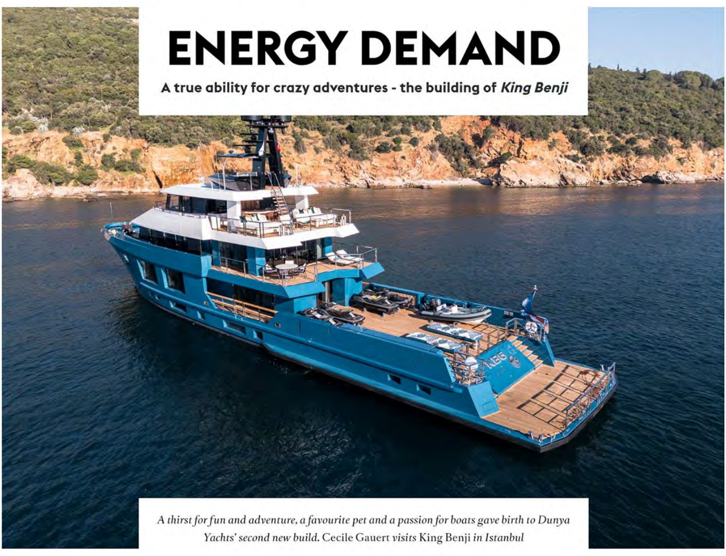
ENERGY DEMAND

A true ability for crazy adventures - the building of *King Benji*



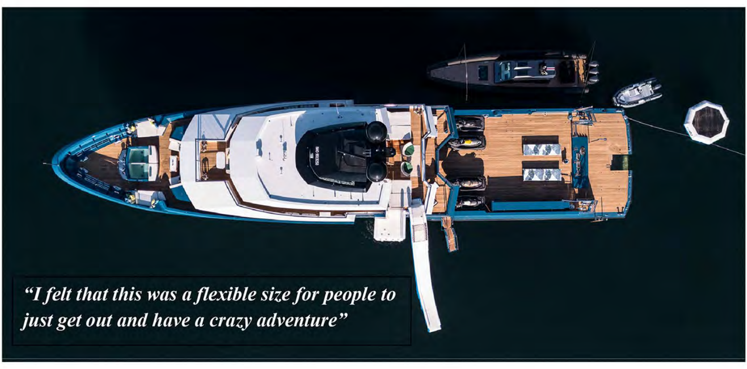
A thirst for fun and adventure, a favourite pet and a passion for boats gave birth to Dunya Yachts' second new build. Cecile Gauert *visits* King Benji *in Istanbul*

JEFF BROWN - BREED MEDIA

"I decided to build *King Benji* because I felt like two things were missing in boats under 500GT," says Josh Golder, her owner. One was a real connection with the marine environment, "so from any spot on this yacht, you can feel like you're outside", he says. "The second was the true ability for crazy adventures, to have a 40ft [12-metre] tender, four 300-horsepower jet skis and every imaginable inflatable toy on there. The goal was to make something that was focused on doing instead of sitting. I go crazy sitting around." On that note, he says of his Nor-Tech 400 Supersport centre console: "I love Nor-Tech; it's my sixth one. I love how it handles in any weather; it's fun to drive; it will do 70 to 80mph [115 to 130km/h]; the stereos are amazing and, in the Caribbean at least, you can land it on a beach."

The Nor-Tech was missing from the vast open deck when I got on board at Dunya Yachts a few months ago – it has since been delivered, ready for action. What was also missing from the freshly painted 47-metre hull was the logo at the stern, a likeness of King Benji, Golder's beloved dog.

Another passion of his is boats. "We're up to 14 at the moment," says Steve Lopez, who's lent his captain's knowledge off and on during the project originally conceived as KB6. Golder, who has just become a father, is a driven and energetic forty-something independent thinker, qualities all reflected in *King Benji*. He looked on the brokerage market for his biggest boat yet but did not find one that ticked enough boxes, Lopez says.



"I felt that this was a flexible size for people to just get out and have a crazy adventure"

One came very close, but it wasn't for sale – the McMullen & Wing *Big Fish*, designed by Gregory C Marshall Naval Architect. When it proved impossible to purchase or duplicate (its builder, McMullen & Wing, is out of the yacht-building business), they got in touch with the Victoria-based Canadian naval architect responsible for its design.

JEFF BROWN - BREED MEDIA

The owner's must-have list included usable outdoor space from the bow to the stern and big windows to take in the environment

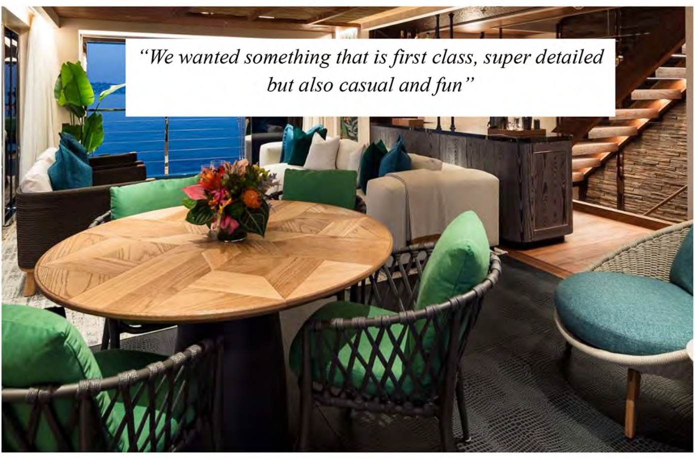
It was a couple of weeks before the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show when they met, and it sounds as if sparks of inspiration flew. They chatted while looking at various GAs in the 35- to 50-metre range, which revealed Golder's 10 must-haves. After listening intently, Marshall flipped over a GA and sketched out a profile in ink pen. “Something like that?” he asked. “Exactly that!” Lopez recalls Golder exclaiming.

“It was a five-minute doodle on the day we met him. And it’s crazy to see how similar it is,” says Marshall, looking back on that first meeting. “Every once in a while, you end up with the kind of project that [answers the question] what you would do if you had free rein for the next project. At that time, it was the perfect project, less focused on the interior and more on what you would do with the boat and what fun things you could carry on board,” says Marshall, who is an active boater himself. Golder’s next question for the naval architect was, “So what’s next?”

The 47-metre hull was freshly painted; custom furniture by Design Unlimited completes the deck (top row). King Benji’s namesake (bottom left). The owner’s full-beam lounge can open for cross ventilation through large windows and doors (bottom right)

Marshall and his team, in constant contact with Golder, worked on the design through the summer of 2019, and construction began at Dunya Yachts, just as the Covid-19 pandemic hit. When I stopped by the yard in late May 2023, the boat was very advanced, but a layout change that made two cabins out of the gym on the lower deck had added a few more weeks to the build.

The gym was part of Golder’s original plan, but with the new addition to his family and a shift in priorities, he decided to make the yacht available for charter – better for everyone, including the crew. Four guest cabins were superior to the initial three in that respect, and the vast open deck, a stylish living area with custom furniture when the toys are in the water, also can serve as a platform for exercise. Although significant, the changes were primarily cosmetic, as plumbing, lighting and air con had already been worked out for two cabins, an indication of the level of detail that went into the planning phase.



“We wanted something that is first class, super detailed but also casual and fun”

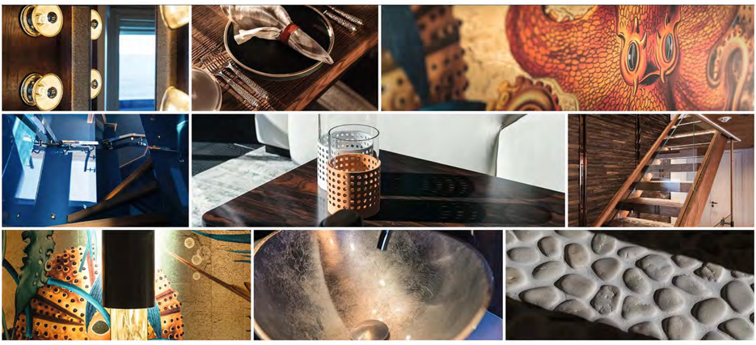
Through all this, the design team and the builder aligned perfectly. “I am a planner,” says Sedat Ergun, Dunya Yachts’ CEO, who worked on big civil engineering projects in the US before creating the family-owned shipyard. He went into it because of his passion for the sea and fell in love with this tough business. The first superyacht the yard built was a 73-metre, the much-lauded *Axioma*, and one of the late Alberto Pinto’s last yacht interior projects. “If you don’t have a proper budget, then you cannot build that level of quality,” Ergun says. This project appealed to him because of its design and the people involved.

“A long time ago, I was on board *Big Fish*,” he says. He remembers thinking, “This is my type of boat – big windows, very functional, not too fancy, it’s very functional. I think I would build it like this.” After several big refits, including confidential projects of high quality, *King Benji* was an appealing new project. The biggest challenge with it, from Ergun’s perspective, was the gross tonnage requirement – below 500GT. “Everything is so much tighter,” he points out.

JEFF BROWN – BREED MEDIA

The biggest challenge with it, from Ergun's perspective, was the gross tonnage requirement – below 500GT

That sub-500GT condition was a must. "I wanted complete flexibility for myself and anyone that's chartering the boat," Golder says. It meant no requirements for pilots, for instance, allowing for spur-of-the-moment decisions to cast off any time of day or night. "I felt that this was a flexible size for people to just get out and have a crazy adventure without having the headaches of a larger boat."



Textures and colours dominate the playful interior with furniture by B&B Italia, Minotti, Holly Hunt, Kettal and Dedon among others, and custom-made pieces by Ulutas, *a yacht interior outfitter in Istanbul*

But this restriction was not to limit options for guests on board. "We incorporated a lot of things that are found on much larger boats, such as the 40ft tender, the hot tub and the cold plunge, the massive back deck, and then really making sure that every single area of the boat was fully finished – you can even have a meal in the bridge. It has the same quality finishings as the main saloon does," Golder says.

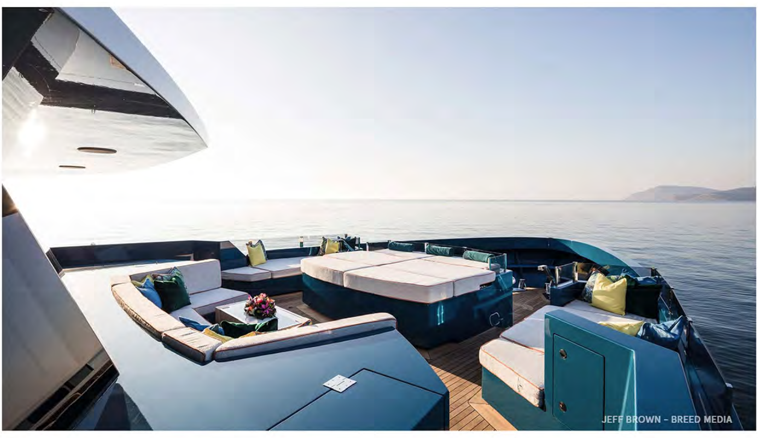
JEFF BROWN – BREED MEDIA

The bridge deck boasts another inviting bar, which includes a built-in teppanyaki grill

To make sure they were honouring all the owner's requests and that he was comfortable with the layout of every space, Marshall's team built what he calls "a giant three-dimensional sketch pad" in a rented warehouse, a scale model, which they had done with the 80-metre *Artefact* previously. "We made a lot of little improvements and changes on the boat in that round," Marshall says. That was the entire point of this exercise. After making notes, marks and cuts, they asked the owner to come back a few days later to try out the newly modified spaces.

JEFF BROWN – BREED MEDIA

"We went up there and wore 3D goggles and walked through every room to make sure that the boat had the relationship with the ocean that we wanted," Golder says. Once they agreed on all design aspects, bids went to shipyards in the US, Northern Europe and Turkey. The decision came down to who could do it in a desired time frame at the best value and quality, Lopez says. Dunya Yachts ticked all the boxes. What mattered most to the owner was the builder's ability to give them personal attention and produce a quality boat compliant with ABS rules. "It was really important that it was, you know, an objective standard," Golder says.

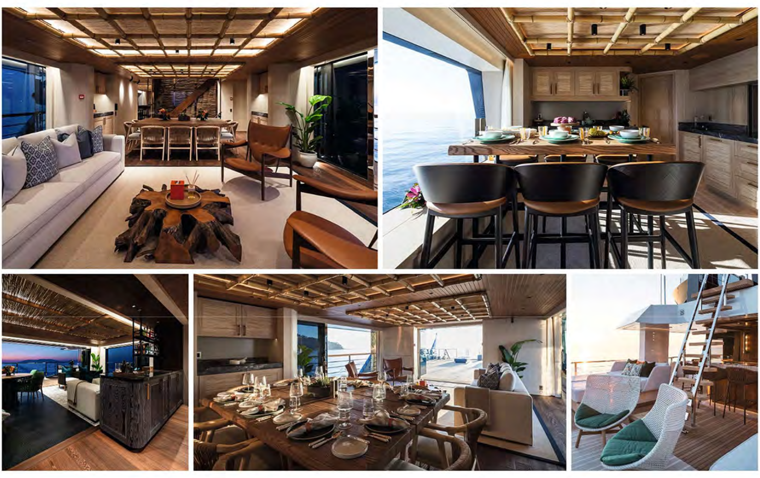

JEFF BROWN – BREED MEDIA

Golder left it up to his team to make recommendations and, although he did visit the shipyard before signing the contract, he did not get involved beyond the development and design phase. He never felt a need to visit the construction site, in Pendik, on the western side of Istanbul. As of this writing, he has not done what I have, which is to say, walked through the actual yacht and he is eagerly looking forward to doing so. When I saw the yacht, she was docked stern-to in a discreet spot at the shipyard. For its size and the amount of open space – the aft deck is truly impressive with its massive crane, which lifts up to 10 tonnes – the boat lives large.

JEFF BROWN – BREED MEDIA

> *"I told them every wall has to be so crazy that if someone were to come on this boat, they would want to take a photo in every single room"*

Stabilised with a Naiad fin system, *King Benji* has a crow's nest accessed via a comfortable ladder with solid handrails from the bridge deck. Below that is an owner's deck with a panoramic cabin and private deck, then comes the main deck, split nearly evenly between exterior and interior spaces, with captain's quarters and a cabin for the chef and stew on the forward end.


The main saloon (top left) with its rustic oak table and the breakfast bar (top right) feature a real bamboo headliner, hand-knotted by Ulutas artisans. The owner's deck blends reclaimed timber and leather tiles, all designed to age gracefully with use (bottom right); from the bridge deck aft, guests can climb a ladder

to access the crow's nest (bottom right)

The galley is remarkable with a big window, a huge pantry and an interactive workspace that can be left open to face a breakfast nook with views. On *King Benji*, guests and crew will be able to interact; it's a part of the experience and the fun. Finally, on the lower deck are the guest cabins, crew cabins and the spacious engine room. One reason it feels clean and airy is that things like water pumps, shore power and air con are in a separate technical space.

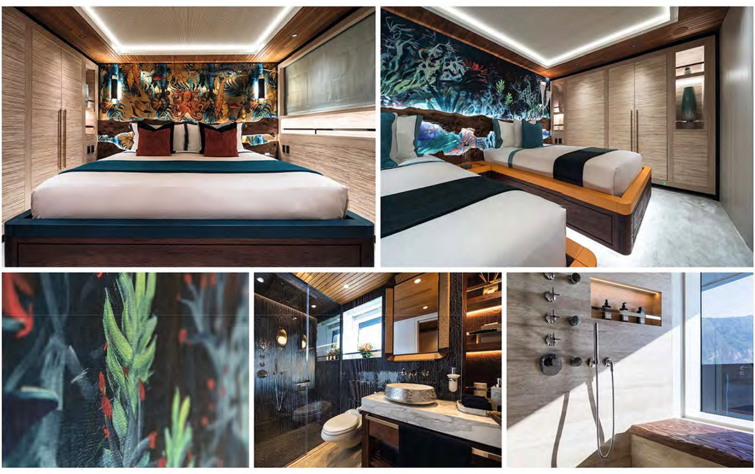
JEFF BROWN – BREED MEDIA

Big windows and wide-opening doors nearly disappear into the superstructure

What I cannot truly appreciate during my visit are the windows, many of them masked. Those big windows and wide-opening doors that nearly disappear into the superstructure – 12 of them – were, from Marshall's point of view, the toughest challenge. It was so important to maintain this connection with the outdoors that at some point during the concept phase, he and Golder even discussed the need for walls. "To get windows that big through class down in a hull in that part of the boat is quite a feat," Marshall says."The whole upper saloon sides and aft bulkheads open almost entirely, and when you look at those doors, you know they are all serious oceangoing doors."

Something I can appreciate on my visit though, is the interior decor by Design Unlimited, which is colourful and fun – graphic wallpapers from Adam Ellis Studio and Pierre Frey, natural bamboo ceilings and wooden floors define the themed spaces (sea-inspired, tropical and a bit moodier on the upper deck).

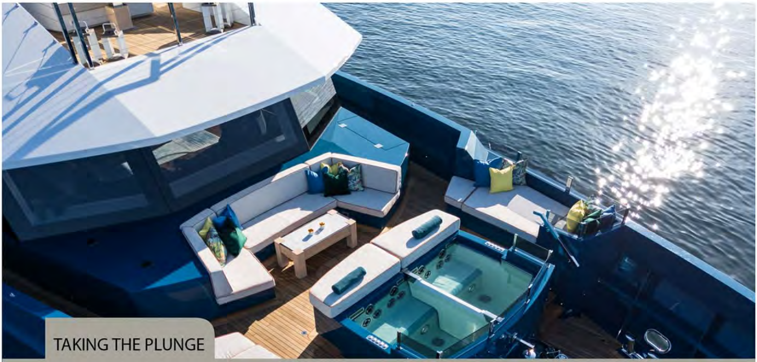
The British design studio might have missed the chance to create this fun interior had they not replied to a one-line inquiry to their general info inbox. Luckily they did, and a detailed brief followed. Golder had zeroed in on Design Unlimited, which works extensively with Sunseeker, because of one of the studio's custom projects, the Baltic 175 sailing yacht *Pink Gin*, delivered in 2017. Serendipity was at play, as they were working on *Pink Shadow* (a successor to *Pink Gin*), then under construction at the Damen shipyard in Turkey.



The guest cabins feature headboards made of reclaimed timber and wallpaper by Adam Ellis and Pierre Frey

Very quickly the team at Design Unlimited learned a few things about their client: he has an aversion to white, which reminds him of hospitals, eschews the trend for subdued greyish and neutral interiors and makes quick decisions. "I told them every wall has to be so crazy that if someone were to come on this boat, they would want to take a photo in every single room," Golder says. "We wanted something that is first class, super detailed but also casual and fun."

The initial inspiration for mood boards came from Chica, a restaurant in Miami, and two hotels, Hotel TwentySeven in Amsterdam and the 1 Hotel in Miami Beach. The design team went all out. The initial concepts were on the wild side, says Mark Tucker, the studio's founder. "The design went right up there and then just sort of quietly settled down to what is now a really nice boat." All is very tactile and organic in feel, with oak and leather meant to age and get more interesting as time goes by, and natural hemp on the face of cabinets. "Everything is there to age nicely," Tucker says.



TAKING THE PLUNGE

Fitness buffs will appreciate this important detail Golder incorporated – a plunge pool that could be enjoyed in the Norwegian fjords or in Croatia in summer. "I wanted a divider that you could put in between, so you could do half cold plunge, half warm," he says. He also told the design team he did not want white fibreglass anywhere on the boat. "So they kind of went silent for a little bit and then they came back and they're like, OK, we figured it out." The resulting custom tub by Headhunter with a drop slide panel can do any temperature variation (hot/hot, cold/cold and hot/cold) and is neatly finished with tiles. "What we ended up having to do is a removable divider that seals off [each side]. One side of the pool can be brought to 6°C while the other side of the pool is 30°C. In essence, there are two separate pool systems, and each one is capable of handling both waters," says Matt Dilay, a member of the technical team at Marshall's office in Victoria.

Overall, Lopez, who spent weeks at the shipyard before the delivery, says he appreciated a collaborative spirit with everyone pushing to get the yacht as close to perfect as possible. The big debut for *King Benji* is the MYBA Charter Show in Genoa, Italy, in April and then she will head to Croatia.

JEFF BROWN – BREED MEDIA

A full toy box includes inflatables, foils, scuba and snorkelling gear and an assortment of towables for the highspeed tenders

Discreet Dunya, meanwhile, has other in-build yachts, including a catamaran support vessel also by Gregory C Marshall and an 87-metre with H2 Yacht Design. *King Benji* may be smaller than they are, but she will be a good ambassador for the shipyard as she joins the charter market with big plans. There are few guarantees in life, but one thing is for sure: *King Benji* won't be sitting idle.

First published in the March 2024 issue of BOAT International.