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The Superyacht

TRUTH • OPINION KNOWLEDGE • IDEAS AND EXPERT INDUSTRY ANALYSIS



REPORT

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PROFESSIONAL SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Yacht agents are an essential logistics tool for captains. They not only provide a fundamental support network for captains on board yachts cruising off the beaten track, but they also work with crew to consistently ensure the safe and smooth operation of their vessels. As more yachts begin to travel through unchartered waters it is becoming increasingly essential to support them through their journeys and ensure that they are as straightforward and hassle-free as possible; a large part of this comes down to the choice of agent. To construct this peer review section *The Superyacht Report* designed a short survey where captains were asked to share their experiences of the agents they have used. Obviously, these are the views of the captains, and not of *TSR* itself; however, we believe it is important to facilitate open and honest sharing of information within the industry.



WHO IS THE BEST AGENT YOU HAVE EVER USED AND WHY?

Here we include some of the most pertinent comments that accompanied the captains' recommendations of the best agent they have used. All agents mentioned in response to this question are listed in the accompanying box.

Tahiti Ocean. Due to the distance travelled and the relatively short period of time one is cruising these waters I think you need as much help as you can get when visiting French Polynesia. Etienne Boutin has over 20 years' experience and he never tires of stopping by the vessel daily to make sure everything and everyone is happy – from the owner/captain through to the junior laundry staff. Being that far from home it's a nice feeling to know you are being very well looked after. He was like that when he started his business and he is still like that today.

Carol Dunlop, Yacht Partners Fiji. She's an expert and has all the contacts, waypoints, excursions, plans, options to choose from ... everything. I'd highly recommend her. The cruising guide she personalises for each yacht is second to none.

Jeanette Tobin, Asia Pacific Superyachts NZ. She delivers an extremely personal service where you think you are her only yacht. She is very passionate about her company, country and yachting, and goes out of her way to make you feel welcome and fully supported whenever you visit New Zealand and anywhere else in the Pacific. She always goes the extra mile.

Jane Midson, Jane's Yacht Services, Antigua. Because nothing is too much trouble and she is like family now!

Sotiris Konstantakis and all the staff from **Cape4 Agency** in Athens, Greece. He is very professional, offers good advice and is at your disposal 24 hours a day.

Yacht Help, now called **Evolution**, in Palma, and **Yacht Chandlers** in the USA. They both provide top service 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with a smile. No matter how ridiculous or small the request is, they will deliver time and time again.

Australian Superyachts/Australasian Superyacht Services offer a solid knowledge of Australian procedures.

It's a tie ... **Tomaso Moreno** from **Catalano Shipping** in Monaco and **Federica Tilocca** from **Nautica Assistance** in Porto Cervo. Both hold stressful positions in the summer, and they are always calm, extremely knowledgeable, can sort anything and they know everyone.

37 South, Auckland. The staff are ex-captains and engineers, they know the job and the country and they help crew a lot. They are nice people as well.

Seal Superyachts. Their transparency in invoicing, prompt responses, efficient service and charity efforts are their best qualities.

Indo Yacht Support (member of the Yacht Support Group). Indonesia is a vast country, the size of the whole Mediterranean sea area, so it takes a special agency to fulfil top-level logistical and shore support in remote places.

Kass Johnson at Dockside in St Maarten. Nothing is too much trouble, she is always on the ball and thinking ahead. She frequently achieved the impossible and never let us down.

Begüm Yachting, Turkey. A very warm, friendly and genuine welcome is always extended by Begüm Doğulu and her representatives. They are available 24/7 and always come up with the goods.

It's a difficult question because, on the one hand, you have service and, on the other, you have price. With larger agencies, you can deal with one employee and have a great result and with another you may have a poorer result. It depends on a lot of things and I have to say that none stand out as the best (although I could certainly tell you the worst by a mile). Good agencies are generally not cheap: **SYS, CYC, J Luise and Sons, Allservices**, for example. I use all of these at times, but they are not always necessary. If you are in Viareggio, I would recommend **Superyacht Services**. In Tunisia, using the services of an agent is essential, but you must take extreme care with everything.

Best agents mentioned

- 37 South, New Zealand
- Adrian & Adrian Jr Lugnani, Gibraltar
- All Services, Italy
- Alphaship, Tenerife
- Asia Pacific Superyachts NZ
- Australian Superyachts/Australasian Superyacht Services, Australia
- Begüm Yachting, Turkey
- BWA, Croatia
- BWA, Worldwide
- C2C Inc, California, USA
- Cape4 Agency, Greece
- Catalano Shipping, Monaco
- CCS, Antigua
- Dockside, St Maarten
- Evolution, Spain
- Forus, Croatia
- H&H Management, Italy
- Henry's Safari Tours, Grenada
- Indo Yacht Support, Indonesia
- Jane's Yacht Services, Antigua
- Karalis Yacht Services, Sardinia
- Kirton & Co, Malta
- Kronos Yacht Agency, Rhodes, Greece
- Luise Associates, Sicily
- Lunautica, Nice/Hamburg/Valencia
- Maersk, Sweden
- Mansueto Marine, Italy
- Nautica Assistance, Sardinia
- Nord Ship, Norway
- Pesto Sea Group, Italy
- Sea Land and Sky Management, Monaco
- Seal Superyachts, Thailand
- Shore Support, Caribbean
- Superyacht Services, Italy
- SYS, Sardinia
- Tahiti Ocean, French Polynesia
- Yacht Partners Fiji, Fiji
- Yacht Chandlers, USA

WHO IS THE WORST AGENT YOU HAVE EVER USED AND WHY?

Interestingly, 30 per cent of the agents listed in the worst category were also mentioned by name in the best category, reinforcing the point that one individual’s experience with a particular agent can differ wildly from another’s. Forty of the captains who responded to the survey were happy to share with us their insight into the yacht agents they deemed the worst, with 15 agents being referred to by name – we have only printed the names of the agents that were referred to on more than one occasion to rule out the possibility of isolated incidents squawing the data.

Although we have chosen to print a list of the names that were mentioned by the captains, the key points to take away are the reasons *why* they were nominated as the worst that the particular captain/captains had encountered.

The issues that arose in the feedback can be put into four categories: attitude, familiarity with the yachting industry specifically, value for money and, lastly, transparency in fees and commissions. Negative feedback regarding the agent’s attitude were repeatedly rude and arrogant behaviour, with some captains complaining of agents being “full of self importance”.

Using an agent unfamiliar with the superyacht industry with limited knowledge of how to handle our specific set of requirements led to comments such as, “Most agents who don’t know the yachting industry are pretty poor”. However, we have to understand that “Actually they are ship agents and although they might be very good as agents for ships, they are not for yachts.” Although constrained by the options available in certain locations, using ship agents who are not dealing with superyachts on a day-by-day basis is more likely to result in a sub-standard service.

Worst agents mentioned

- AI Yacht Trade Consortium S.A., Greece
- Asia Pacific Superyachts
- BWA, Croatia
- BWA, Turkey
- JLT, Italy
- Pesto, Italy

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It seems that pricing itself is not a particular problem, unless the quality and service don't meet expectations. Comments like "huge mark up on prices" and being "hugely expensive for what was provided" with "relatively high prices for average return in services provided (for example, berth reservations)" arose a number of times.

"I suspect that the extreme prices seen in different locations are supported, and in many cases are caused, by the agents."

When it came to transparency there were a lot of comments on price fixing and monopolies. One captain said, "I suspect also that the extreme prices seen in different locations are supported, and in many cases are caused, by the agents." "Their accounting leaves a lot to be desired and smells of backhand payments"; even going so far as to comment, "they gave me false invoices". This is clearly a brush that the superyacht industry does not want to be tarnished with.

Lack of knowledge was an additional reason for agents appearing on the 'worst' list, as was not being available 24/7 (an essential requirement listed numerous times in the 'best' category). As one captain summed up, "There is nothing worse than an agent who doesn't answer their phone or when they do answer they give a lame excuse that they have been busy ... That's why we use an agent – to alleviate our own workload when we are busy."

WHAT CAN AGENTS DO BETTER IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THEIR SERVICE OR VALUE PROPOSITION?

Guy Booth, M/Y *Aurelia*

Know the local laws regarding arrival/departure procedures in their port (they often change from port to port), and make sure that they have a clear procedure for helping yachts through a language barrier when dealing with local authorities. Anyone can recommend a restaurant or send you a driver (then charge you for it); how about focusing on what yachts really require, and take care of the housekeeping later?

Clive Carrington-Wood, M/Y *Serenity II*

Answer the phone and e-mails promptly. Inexperienced local representatives need to be closely tutored to understand the needs of the industry.

Dave Cherington, M/Y *Talisman Maiton*

Maintain good communications; we are a busy charter yacht and need quick service.

Kaj Christensen, M/Y *Auspicious*

Know their business; not to make things up or pretend to know if they don't. They should say, "Sorry, I don't know the answer to that, but I will find out and get back to you" – and then make sure they do get back to you!

Pierre-Marie Feuille, S/Y *Mikhail S. Voronsov*

Employ ex-crew in order to understand our needs better.

Will Givens, M/Y *Lady Christina*

More transparency.

Jorgen Gormsen, M/Y *Ulysses*

Communicate more and be transparent.

Simon Ladbrooke, M/Y *Paramour*

Listen to the needs and wishes of the captains and owners rather than hard selling. Successful selling is achieved by asking the right questions.

Raphael Legrand, M/Y *Manifiq*

Listen, listen and listen again carefully to all requests.

Dùghall macLachlainn, M/Y *Tango*

Learn our industry needs and try to give value for money. Too many agents out there charge a daily rate, but don't do anything extra for it. A lot of the time I leave feeling ripped off. This, in my experience, is mostly with Mediterranean-based agencies, especially those that have become multi-national.

Arthur Miller, M/Y *Hakuna Matata*

Answer communications immediately and know their area intimately. Have more than one supplier option instead of using just the one they get kickbacks from. Have connections with ports and fuel stations, know the weather, anchorages, attractions, etc. The biggest problem area is transport – taxis cause more trouble for captains than any other issue.

Oleg Sergeev, M/Y *Gaja*

A rapid response 24/7 is very important ... Flexibility and – where the situation requires – presenting a non-standard solution.

Ron Skopila, M/Y *Maria Teresa*

Not to overcharge with their commission. They aim for around 50 per cent, which is too greedy.

Anonymous responses

Answer the phone when you call, keep you informed of developments and complete the task or service you requested them to do. Work in yours and the yacht's best interests and leave the lame excuses in the coffee cup when talking to you. Charge fairly and honestly and at least give the impression they are working for you, and not make you feel like you've done all the legwork.

Realise that owners are not their cash cow. Time is precious, and the owners are paying for what they want, not what the agent wants to give them.

Be upfront with all charging schedules and prices and be honest.

I find most are pretty good. Some try to get away with outrageous fees; I guess some kind of standardisation would be good (not Italian!).

Use trained cooks/chefs for the provisioning.

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Clear concise billing with government-regulated services shown so no cost surprises for the captains, management or owners.

Transparent accounting, friendly and professional service, have prior experience as senior superyacht crew.

“Agents should re-read the definition of their job description, concentrating on the parts where they are required to represent the ship’s interest during the stop. Their prime motivation should not be to increase the amount spent during the stop.”

Be clear on their rates and be fluent in English.

Honest, straight, fast service.

Be very open with costs. Be clear in their dealings.

Transparent invoicing, with third-party invoices available for scrutiny and checking; some agents add to third-party invoices, which is unacceptable.

Agents should re-read the definition of their job description, concentrating on the parts where they are required to represent the ship’s interest during the stop. Their prime motivation should not be to increase the amount spent during the stop. They should have an active presence representing their customers in relation to local politics and service providers to keep costs low and services high.

HAVE AGENTS IMPROVED OVER THE PAST DECADE AND IF YES, IN WHAT WAY?

Sixty-two percent of the captains that answered this question answered positively. Twenty-two per cent thought that agents had not improved and the remainder thought that they had remained the same.

YES

Kaj Christensen, M/Y *Auspicious*

I think generally they have to be competitive and they have to know their business otherwise captains will move elsewhere for better service. There are a lot of agents out there now who know their business, so competition is keen.

Simon Ladbrooke, M/Y *Paramour*

Absolutely – in the quality of the service, communications, provisions, access to consumables, parts and imported items, personalised itineraries, including transport, and entertainment options.

Raphael Legrand, M/Y *Manifiq*

I would say that the same agents I know are outperforming the other ones who, to me, haven’t improved. I believe the person you are dealing with is very important and my favourite agents have always made sure they hired qualified staff who understand the request.

Phil Pennicott, M/Y *Muse*

I think technology has played a part in improving the service; however, I have only ever had good service from the agents I use.

Phil Walsh, M/Y *Mogambo*

Yes, they realise there is competition out there and they all try hard to keep ‘their’ vessels happy.

Anonymous responses

The quality agents are still in business and the others have faded away.

Yes, they are more competitive and have a broader range of services, and larger areas are now covered.

Yes, more around-the-clock service, refrigerated vehicles for fresh produce delivery, more support with local laws and customs.

Yes, more actual yachties have entered this field, bringing a better understanding of a yacht’s needs and concerns.

DON’T KNOW

Clive Carrington-Wood, M/Y *Serenity II*

I don’t know ... there have been good and bad agents. The bad ones I don’t use again, the good ones have always been good, which is why I use them!

Jorgen Gormsen, M/Y *Ulysses*

Some have (where competition is fierce) improved, but no competition equates to slack service – all mouth, no action.

Dùghall macLachlainn, M/Y *Tango*

I’m not really sure if they have. They mainly give the same service that we were actually doing ourselves and charging more money.

Anonymous responses

Yes and no. Yes, in that regulations are more complex and agents have more to understand and to help yachts comply with. No, in that the cost for some of the simple things can be excessive and I suspect agents are taking a backside cut for things like transportation and moorage. There isn’t enough transparency with some of the agents.

Not particularly better or worse. Technology has improved, there are more agents, but the service is similar.

NO

Guy Booth, M/Y *Aurelia*

Maybe not ... 10 years ago, an agent really was a veritable bank vault of invaluable local information. Those that have survived have a loyal following among captains and crew. Nowadays, it seems like there is an increasing number of companies who have hired a gaggle of great-looking girls, in tight uniforms and heels, who (with respect) know nothing more than how to extract money out of the industry ... they seem to have lost their focus.

Anonymous response

No, I think they have lost touch to a degree with the direct relationship with the client.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD AGENT?

Guy Booth, M/Y *Aurelia*

Knowledge, a good memory, flexibility, honesty and the ability to follow up on their word.

Clive Carrington-Wood, M/Y *Serenity II*

A cheerful and positive response to all requests, a willingness to go the extra mile to help and a thorough knowledge of the industry and their local area to make best use of one in supporting the other.

Kaj Christensen, M/Y *Aspicious*

Knowledge, sincerity, being respected and known in the business, doesn't charge like a wounded bull, doesn't rip you off, gets back to you when they say they will, tells you if they don't understand what you need from them and gets back to you with the real answer promptly.

“A cheerful and positive response to all requests, a willingness to go the extra mile to help and a thorough knowledge of the industry and their local area to make best use of one in supporting the other.”

Jorgen Gormsen, M/Y *Ulysses*

Attentiveness, communication with the vessel, so they know what goes on, fluent in English; misunderstandings often occur when someone only understands half of what is said.

Mike Hein, M/Y *Mea Culpa*

Personable, fair pricing, quality of information, being able to do what's asked, anticipation.

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Simon Ladbrooke, M/Y *Paramour*

Honest, reliable, professional and well organised. In certain countries having good connections/rapport with local authorities can be very advantageous.

Raphael Legrand, M/Y *Manifq*

A good listener, a person with great contacts who can open doors, a person who tells you the truth and doesn't promise things he knows he can't deliver.

Steve McDonald, M/Y *Noble House*

Honesty, integrity, professionalism and an understanding of the unique needs a superyacht has.

Mike Polymenopoulos, M/Y *Gran Pez*

Responsiveness, reliability, yacht knowledge, area knowledge (both yachting-wise as well as the shoreside), transparency, availability, communication skills and a 'professional service with a smile'.

Captain Oleg Sergeev, M/Y *Gaja*

To be available every minute of the day when necessary, and is able to find solutions in all situations. Good agents must have a strong relationship with the local state authority (harbour master, police, customs, etc.) The perfect agent can find solutions in situations involving unusual requests from guests, etc.

Ron Skopila, M/Y *Maria Teresa*

Two words: efficiency and honesty.

Anonymous responses:

An agent who truly understands what each boat does, who understands my specific vessel's schedule, boss, usage and budget, and to accurately explain the situation to the crew beforehand.

Quick and comprehensive replies to issues raised. On call 24/7. Having all the information at their fingertips and being in contact with appropriate people to support their role.

Prompt responses, efficient service, friendliness and ethical with a corporate social responsibility.

Integrity, scaled billing only for services asked for, yacht familiarity, truly representing the best interest of the vessel.

Communication, speed of completing requests, fair pricing, ensuring smooth procedures are dealt with, work in your and the yacht's best interest, be service oriented and have no attitude or arrogance.

Honest, punctual, informed and up to date with local regulations, but, above all, have a good can-do attitude and a customer-focused business model. ■



TO COMMENT ON THIS ARTICLE,
EMAIL: ISSUE153@SUPERYACHTREPORT.COM
WITH SUBJECT: PROFESSIONAL SERVICE WITH A SMILE