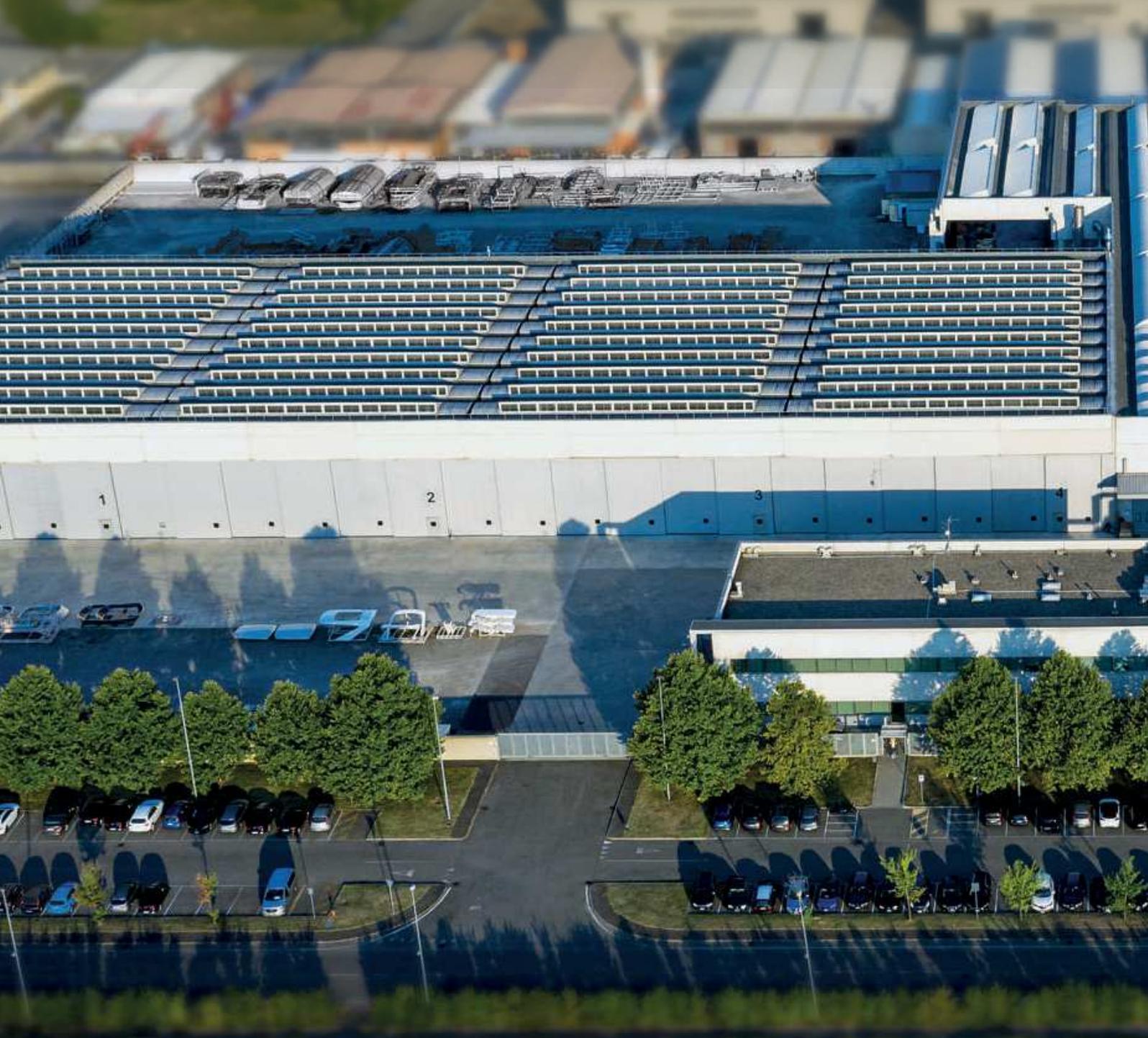


INLAND INNOVATORS



Located over 100km inland of coastal cities like Genoa and yacht-building hubs like La Spezia and Viareggio, the Absolute facility is a self-contained hub of in-house innovation, automation, craftsmanship and friendly, family-style management.

WORDS **CLARE MAHON** PHOTOS **ABSOLUTE**





Giuseppe Bertocci (Head of Production), Absolute co-founders Sergio Maggi and Marcello Bè, Paola Carini (Administration & HR), Angelo Gobbi (President), Patrizia Gobbi (General Manager) and Cesare Mastroianni (CCO & Vice President of Sales)

I'm driving around looking for the Absolute shipyard, my instincts and my navigation app at war. There's not a body of water in sight. A green sea of freshly ploughed fields is all around me and the aroma is of farmland, not low tide. Feeling

I must be way off track, I pull over to see what's wrong. Suddenly, a truck loaded with Volvo Penta IPS engines passes me. Follow that truck, I tell myself, and soon I'm there.

Sergio Maggi and Marcello Bè founded Absolute in 2002 in an area outside of Piacenza where the other major industry is ... tomato canning. After all, Piacenza is in northern Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, renowned for its local produce including ham, salami, cheese and pasta, as well as wine. This, plus the fact the Med is about 100km south, make it an unusual location for shipbuilding, but Maggi and Bè are locals and wanted to stay close to their roots and the hardworking local talent.

The two had met while employed at Cantieri Nautici Gobbi, but when the company was sold, they decided to branch off and establish a yard of their own. Four years later, looking for ways to increase automation in their production lines, they asked former boss Angelo Gobbi to join them at Absolute.

"We started with nothing much more than a good first boat," Maggi says. "Going

forward, we had an idea of what we wanted, but we didn't know how to get there. Angelo is our visionary. He had the knowhow and guided us to where we are today."



The entrance to the five-hectare Absolute facility outside Piacenza, situated 60km southeast of Milan in northern Italy

TEAM FIRST

Absolute is all about teamwork and efficiency, not ego. Gobbi happily joined his former employees as a partner and put his skills to work creating a state-of-the-art facility spread over almost 50,000sqm – imagine seven football pitches – where boats are built using an optimised production chain called Integrated Structural System or ISS.

Hulls are hand-finished while their corresponding interior structures are precision cut by robotic arms using CNC technology. Dedicated teams then assemble the interiors in modules and lower them into the hulls.

After the interiors have been mounted and sealed, the hulls are taken out of their moulds and the running systems are installed. The organisation and automation are astounding, and the shipyard works around the clock. After the human workforce goes home, robots and computers take over, fetching supplies from a large and recently expanded automatic warehouse then setting them up for the next day's work.

While Absolute is open to every kind of software upgrade and technological



Left: Sergio Maggi (centre), Absolute co-founder and Head of Design, in a manufacturing meeting; right: fellow Absolute co-founder Marcello Bè (far right) in a tech meeting

“In my head right now I’m thinking of four or five new projects - two we’ve just begun, two in the final stages of planning and one that’s still to come. The cycle is continuous and keeps us busy.”

Sergio Maggi, Co-Founder and Head of Design

improvement, Maggi says that building a yacht will never be a fully automated or entirely industrial process.

“We can try to organise delivery and production to the highest degree, but there will always be a lot of handwork involved in laying a hull and mounting running systems. We design everything in 3D and nothing is left to chance, but we will still always need humans to do quality control,” he says.

It’s this blend of humanity and technology that makes Absolute Yachts special. Everything at Absolute is done in-house by a tightly knit team headed by management and ownership that are one and the same. “And we’re here all day, every day,” says Cesare Mastroianni, CCO and Vice President of Sales.

The shipyard staff is like an extended family, but unlike most families, they work well as a team and seem to like each other. This all-in-it-together approach allows Absolute to move quickly and stay flexible.

“We have invested in our people,” says Mastroianni. “We don’t need to have a lot of meetings. Sometimes we just discuss ideas by the coffee machine.”

IN-HOUSE CREATIVITY

Maggi, who on top of being a co-founder also heads the design department, echoes Mastroianni’s words.

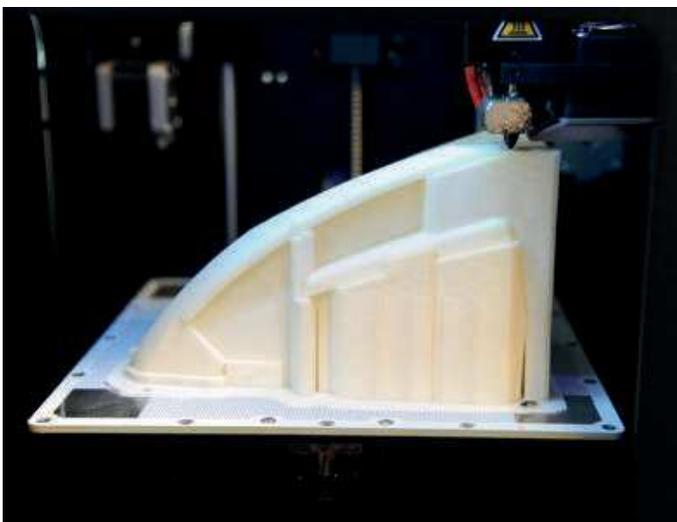
“We believe in staying independent and doing everything in-house. Yes, maybe you miss having people bring you new ideas from outside, but if you do that, you’re always trying to chase a new concept, looking for solutions to new problems,” Maggi says.

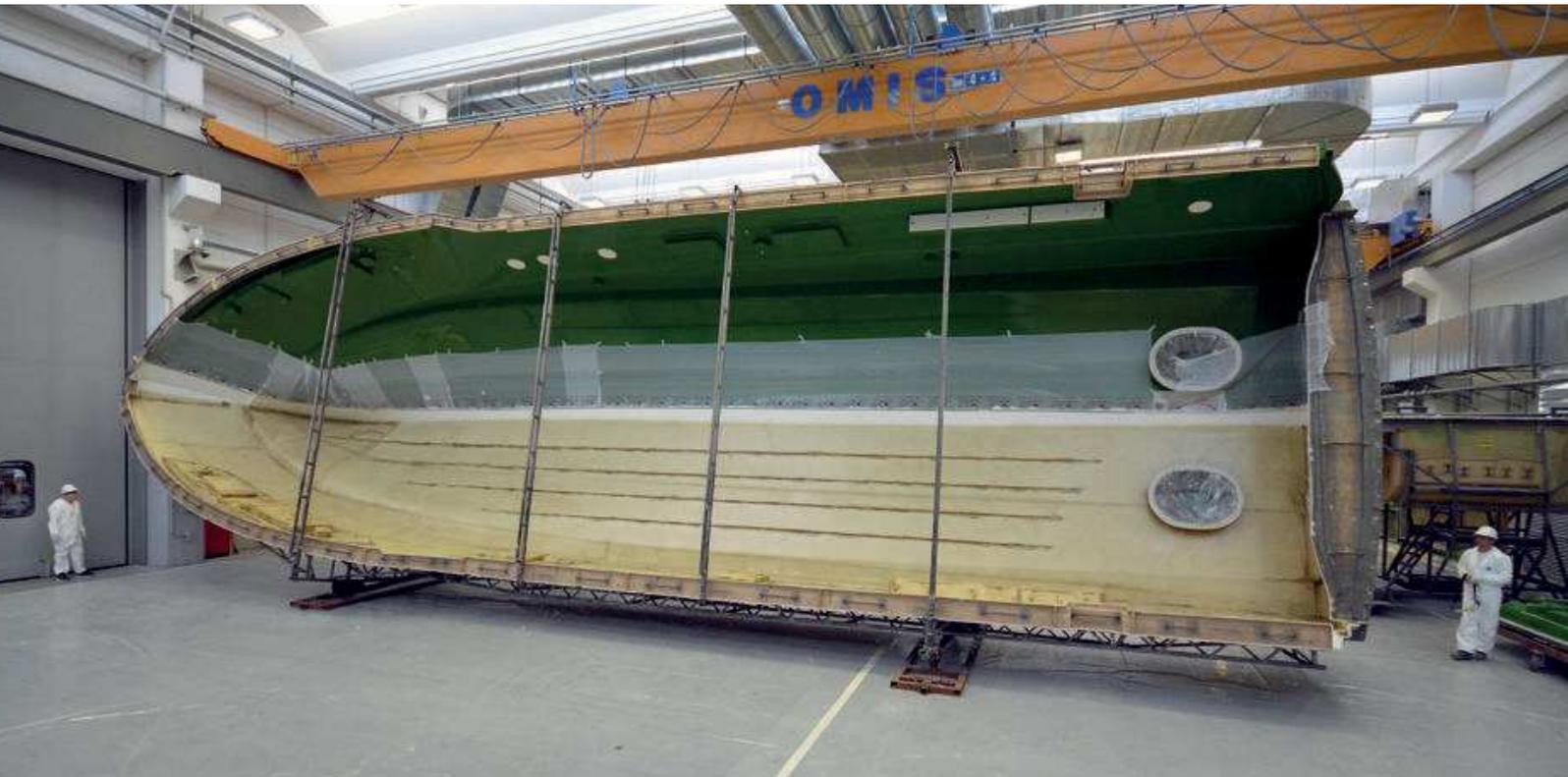
“Absolute’s approach is more like adaptive evolution because the team that has created all the best features of previous yachts know which ones to apply to new models. We’re building on our experience and the suggestions we get from our owners and dealers.”

Absolute works with a ratio of about one stylist to three engineers. “The stylist does their part, then shows their work to the engineers and they take over the project,” Maggi says.

“This means we have a perfect synergy between our production and our style departments. They go hand in hand and this helps us to guarantee quality. We don’t go for impact or extras – everything is functional. Maybe an owner who’s looking for a status symbol won’t like what we do, but an owner who wants to live aboard and enjoy their yacht in safety and comfort will find what they’re looking for in an Absolute.”

Absolute uses 3D printing and modelling in their yacht designs; automated machinery in the warehouse





A hull prepared for deck trimming (above); GRP lamination (bottom left); Absolute's quality department overlooks the factory floor (bottom right)

Keep in mind that these are Italians, so style, even if it's functional style, is always part of the package, as are *bon vivant* touches like wine cellars and stemmed glasses designed to adhere magnetically to table tops. And in a yachting market that's constantly changing, Absolute likes to stay a step or two ahead.

"We try to come up with two new boat designs per year because the market is changing all the time," Maggi says. "It usually takes us about a year to develop a model, but in my head right now I'm thinking of four or five new projects – two we've just begun, two in the final stages of planning and one that's still to come. The cycle is continuous and keeps us busy."

One thing that seems like it will never change is Absolute's love for a certain propulsion system, Maggi confirms. "Volvo IPS forever! When we were designing our first model, we heard that IPS was coming and we contacted Volvo right away. I think we were the first to use them."

From a builder's point of view, Maggi loves how IPS works with

industrial production methods and can be mounted in a smaller aft space. And he also likes the client comfort that comes with reduced noise and vibration, as well as the improved fuel consumption.

FROM LAND TO SEA

While Absolute's ultra-sophisticated build technology seems to know no limits, the dimensions of Italy's *autostrada* expressways pose some strict ones for a yard located quite some distance from the sea. Yachts over 52ft are divided into hull and superstructure before being trucked down to the open water, otherwise they wouldn't fit through tunnels or under overpasses.

"We have a lot of experience in designing for the maximum possible size for overland transportation and we're very quick at disassembling and re-assembling our yachts," Mastroianni says.

"I can't reveal any secrets, but over the years we've perfected a kind of plug-and-play system for re-joining the electrical and





The bodywork department (left); the superstructure of a 60 Fly (right) is prepared to be lowered onto the hull; an Absolute Navetta 48 in the test pool (bottom)

hydraulic systems between hull and superstructure. We can have a yacht up to 58ft ready to go in just 36 hours, whereas larger yachts are ready with all commissioning systems tested in 10 days.”

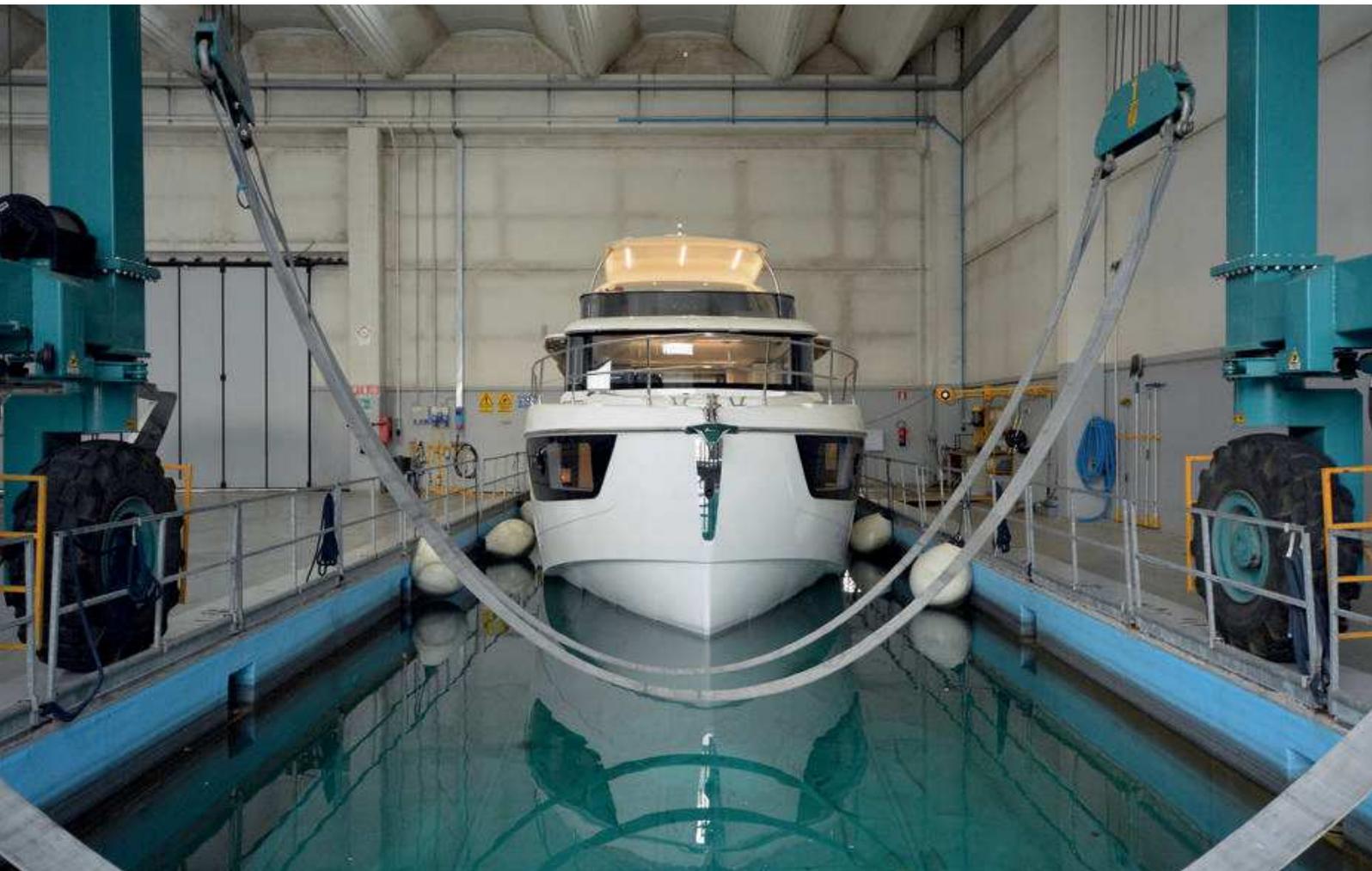
Just as Absolute’s production system is all in-house, its sales network is entirely run by their own dealers, which in Asia include Hong Kong-based Absolute Marine, whose orders for the city include the new Navetta 64, set to arrive in late 2021.

“We invest in the yard, its technology and in new models but we also invest in our dealers, backing them up and keeping them

informed,” Mastroianni says. “We began working in the Far East in 2012 in China and then in Hong Kong. Later, we began working in Japan and Taiwan and lately in Singapore. We have recently appointed a dealer in Thailand.

“Thomas Woo [of Absolute Marine] in Hong Kong is one of our top dealers, both for the volume of boats that he sells and for the fact that he sells consistently well across our entire range. It’s a niche market, but he knows his business.”

Boarding an Absolute yacht, you may find yourself curious





The Navetta 73 is Absolute's flagship – the first unit in Hong Kong was delivered in 2020; the master suite (below) is forward, as it is on some other Absolute models

about the unusual, volume-maximising lines, but rest assured that you'll step back to shore impressed by the build quality and the planning and intelligence that have gone into getting the most liveability out of every millimetre.

SUNNY FUTURE

Absolute is constantly updating its range to keep on top of market trends and is still receiving acclaim for the Navetta 64 that debuted late last year, due in large to the innovative option of a convertible aft cabin beside the swim platform. This year's new models will be the 48' Coupé and the 60 Fly, the former introducing a new series featuring solar power, while the latter offers the option of solar panels on the hardtop.



Maggi says: "The 60 Fly will be a new reference point for flybridge yachts, a boat that will establish the parameters for this typology of yacht in the years to come."

Not surprisingly for a shipyard that loves engineering as much as design, Absolute set up a mini solar energy plant to find the best type of solar panels to mount on its yachts, with the system to be rolled out on the 48 Coupé.

Translucent solar panels in the roofing will produce energy for running the boat's hotel systems while also letting light, but not heat, filter into the saloon. You can drop anchor, turn off your engine and generators, and enjoy the clean air and silence. Interestingly, Maggi says the Coupé design is more reflective of Absolute's earliest ranges (Sport Cruiser, Sport Yacht, Sport Line) than the subsequent Fly and Navetta lines.

"The 48' Coupé is the modern heir to our first boats, but things have changed in the meantime. Clients used to want something fast and glamorous, and didn't really care about living on the water. Now, on top of moving fast, our clients want a comfortable boat where they can entertain and stay aboard for extended periods of time. Now, you need function and ease of use," Maggi says.

"The Coupé still has a sporty soul and delivers on the water, but it's also comfortable and sustainable. We designed extra-large windows that open and close like car windows, so there's as much fresh air moving through the boat as possible. The aft section has openings in the gunwales and glass under the aft railing so you can see the water at all times."

Ironically, the Absolute shipyard doesn't have such views, but it does have a management team with a crystal-clear vision of what they want for their clients and how to deliver it. ☘

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