



Firefly

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INSPIRED BY THE SUBSTANCE AND STYLE OF J CLASS YACHTS, THE HOEK-DESIGNED FIREFLY IS AN INNOVATIVE, ADVANCED AND PERSONAL SAILING YACHT THAT IS – QUITE LITERALLY – IN A CLASS OF HER OWN



At the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta in 2010, the Dutch owner of *Alert* – the Philip Rhodes 19.8-metre cruising ketch – was captivated by the speed and beauty of the J Class yachts *Velsheda* and *Ranger*. He decided to commission a boat that would resemble the J Classes, but be as small as possible with the potential to beat them in any wind conditions. Astonishingly, the boat that resulted from this idea – *Firefly*, named after a hill-top restaurant he visited in Mustique soon after the Antigua regatta – was sailing just nine months later.

The Dutch companies he chose to produce the boat had a wealth of J Class experience: Hoek Design recently optimised the designs of four J Class yachts, Bloemsma Aluminiumbouw has built three J Class hulls, and one of these, *Lionheart*, was completed by Claasen Shipyards.

The first plates were cut at the end of July last year, and at the Monaco Yacht Show in September 2010 the owner met Mark van Gelderen – an experienced Extreme 40 and maxi boat sailor – and recruited him as captain.

‘The owner has a great eye for detail which he has used to great effect in his fashion business,’ says van Gelderen. ‘He was involved in a lot of the detailed design work such as the deck layout which he wanted to be aesthetically pleasing, although I also had an input to make sure it was practical.’

‘We planned key decision moments,’ says Joachim Kieft, managing director of Bloemsma Aluminiumbouw and project manager for *Firefly*’s hull construction and rig. ‘We never had to wait for an answer, as the owner was able to make decisions on the spot. This way we could speed up the construction process even more.’

She was launched in May and the following month – after a seven-day delivery trip from Ijmuiden in northern Holland to Palma in Mallorca, during which she surfed down a wave at 28 knots boatspeed in the Bay of Biscay – she competed in the Superyacht Cup. Since then she has raced in the Maxi Yacht Rolex Cup in Porto Cervo and at Les Voiles de Saint Tropez.

She is undoubtedly similar to a J Class above the waterline, with her mainly flush deck, long overhangs and high-aspect fractional rig. But her underwater shape is a different story, with a canoe body and fin and bulb keel which, at 30 tonnes, gives her a 50 per cent ballast ratio.

‘I wanted her to have feminine lines and masculine performance,’ the owner explains. She has a swept deck in yellow cedar – chosen over teak for its lightness in colour and weight – and dark varnished mahogany



Firefly’s owner was instrumental in the design of the yacht’s deck layout, which he wanted to be both practical and aesthetically pleasing. She has a yellow cedar deck (above) and all deck gear, winches and custom aluminium fittings are anodised in grey (left and above left). She provided our reporter with a short burst of great upwind sailing (opposite)



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covering boards and the companionway hatch surround. Lewmar deck gear, Harken winches and custom aluminium fittings such as toerail supports are anodised in a matching grey colour, as specified by the owner.

The ingenious circular forehatch, aided by gas struts, hinges down and turns 180 degrees so it can be stowed under the foredeck. This gives a clear opening with a 1.2 metre diameter that allows easy access for sail stowing – as does the 90 centimetre-wide main companionway. This leads to a functional, stripped-out racing interior with few concessions to comfort or privacy. The layout is simple and includes a galley to port and a navigation station to starboard; stowage lockers with zipped fabric fronts; a shower compartment to port and heads to starboard; and ten folding pipe cots in the forepeak.

The owner was particularly keen to source items from companies in the Netherlands, which van Gelderen says ‘made communication easy’. The carbon and PBO rig is from Hall Spars in Breskens and Smart Rigging in Joure, for instance. A Dutch connection is also evident in the use of the colour orange throughout the boat.

‘The owner decided he wanted orange to appear in many places, such as the boot top, some of the ropes, the gennakers, crew clothing and even the blades of the ventilation fans,’ Victor Weerens, project manager of the fit-out, tells me. The boat also flies an orange, white and blue ensign, the Dutch flag under William of Orange.

While the original intention was to race competitively against the J Classes, another idea had taken hold, and that was to start a one-design class with *Firefly* as the prototype. Her owner and the companies that created her have formed the F Class Association to promote this.

‘When we finished with the designs we talked about it with people in the industry,’ Kieft says, ‘people were very keen on it. Rather than have a J Class with a heavy interior which owners often don’t use, it makes more sense to have an F Class and a motor yacht as a mother ship.’

‘Since we launched the boat everyone has been all over us which is really nice,’ adds van Gelderen. ‘It will be good to promote the class. The systems are relatively easy and the running costs are way less than a J.’

A box rule has been formulated to ensure that the





The yacht was intended for fast sailing (right and opposite left). Her interiors (opposite right and opposite top) were designed for practicality rather than luxury cruising

basics such as hull lines, sail plan and cockpit layouts will be the same. 'But within that box there are opportunities to make changes,' says Kieft, 'such as a lifting keel to access shallow harbours – the design of which would not give a different performance – or a fitted-out interior.'

But there are details of the rule still to be agreed and it is probable that new F Class owners will have the opportunity to influence some decisions.

A week after Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez it transpired a second F Class yacht had been commissioned – hull construction would soon begin at Bloemsma Aluminiumbouw, and would be completed at Claasen Shipyards. 'This way the F Class is a fact. We look forward to seeing them compete against each other next year,' says Kieft.

Other potential F Class owners would be free to use any yard and equipment supplier. But as van Gelderen notes: 'With the knowledge that Bloemsma, Claasen and Hall Spars have it would make sense to use them – it would save on the whole engineering bit.'

When I was onboard *Firefly* off Saint Tropez, we had sailed for ten minutes when a light breeze led us to believe there might be a race. For a short time we enjoyed impressive upwind sailing, punctuated by loud, gunshot-like noises each time the sheets were eased a fraction – the sound was part of what attracted the owner to the J Classes in Antigua. *Firefly* has yet to be properly tested against the Js, having only raced against two – *Shamrock V* in inconclusive conditions at Saint Tropez and *Lionheart* at the Superyacht Cup where *Firefly* just beat her overall, although both boats were untested.

'We went straight to Palma after the launch,' says van Gelderen. 'We hoisted sails we had never seen before and raced with people who had never sailed the boat before and did pretty well.' In Porto Cervo, *Firefly* had a mid-fleet overall position racing against boats that van Gelderen says, 'are so different, it's hard to compare'.

'Early results show she is very fast indeed,' says Andre Hoek, founder of Hoek Design. When asked if the J Classes' superior waterline lengths will out-do the F Classes, he says: 'In light winds the F will be faster than the Js and, on paper, in heavy airs as well – marginally. It will then depend on how well each boat is handled.'

Van Gelderen is the only permanent crew member but *Firefly's* race crew – regatta sailors from all over the world, all wearing crew uniforms designed by the owner – numbers about 15. This is considerably fewer than a J Class, thanks to her smaller size and relative simplicity (for example, the asymmetric pole-less spinnakers).



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FIREFLY Bloemsma Aluminiumbouw/Claasen Jachtbouw

<p>LOA 35.2m LWL 22.23m Beam 5.58m Draught 5m (3.6m in lifting keel F Class) Air Draught 41.5m Displacement 60 tonnes</p>	<p>Gross tonnage 59 GT Engine Steyr 245hp diesel Generator Steyr 106hp Fuel capacity 900 litres</p>	<p>Water capacity 800 litres Spars Hall Spars Sails North Sails – 594 sq m upwind; 1,295 sq m downwind</p>	<p>Construction Aluminium Naval architecture, interior and exterior design Hoek Design Builder/year Bloemsma Aluminiumbouw & Claasen Shipyards/2011</p>	<p>Bloemsma Aluminiumbouw Holland tel: +31 (0) 5 1523.2528 email: info@bloemsma-aluminiumbouw.nl web: www.bloemsma-aluminiumbouw.nl</p>	<p>Claasen Shipyards Holland tel: +31 (0)71 572 7736 web: www.claasenshipyards.com F Class Yachts www.fclassyachts.com</p>
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'I wanted to unite beauty with speed,' says the owner, who is clearly delighted with the boat he describes as, 'modern technology in an old jacket'. He recently bought the motor yacht *Nomade* as a mother ship and is renaming her *Bartender* to 'fit better to the DNA of *Firefly*'.

As this feature goes to press *Firefly* is being prepared for travel to the Caribbean with

Dockwise Yacht Transport – a sensible decision given reports of her inevitable 'submarine' tendencies at sea – and she will then have the opportunity to race against *Velsheda* and *Ranger*, the relatively established race boats which inspired her conception. 'That will be really nice,' says van Gelderen. 'It will be the real test.'

input from both the captain and the owner ensured the deck layout was practical and attractive

The sail plan and cockpit layouts will be the same for future F class yachts but other changes can be made

The yacht's practical interior spaces are designed to make racing easy rather than for comfortable cruising

Firefly is relatively simple to sail, for example, she has asymmetric pole-less spinnakers

