

THE RACE FOR PERFECTION

THE VOLVO OCEAN RACE BOATYARD

TEXT / PHOTO // KENNETH ANDERSON / MARCEL PABST

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THE STORY

When you're preparing to embark on a journey that will last eight months, cover 46,000 nautical miles and see you take on four oceans, six continents plus the unpredictable elements – you need a boat you can trust. And for the sailors competing in the 2017–18 edition of the Volvo Ocean Race, there's only one place with the right combination of skills, experience and expertise to deliver it – the Boatyard.

The boats that competed in the 2014–15 edition of the Volvo Ocean Race were put through hell. Pushed to their limits by sailors obsessed with stealing every second from their rivals, in weather conditions that made the hunt for Moby Dick seem like a pedalo ride in the park. This was the ultimate test in sailing. And when it was all over, the boats had the battle scars to prove it. However, the demanding nature of the Volvo Ocean Race meant the boats didn't have long to lick their wounds. In less than two years, the entire fleet would have to be repaired, refitted and ready to take their place on the starting line once again.

Another race had begun. This time, though, the boats wouldn't be competing against each other, they would be competing against the ticking clock. And the action wouldn't play out on the high seas, but in the unexpected setting of an old fish market in Lisbon, Portugal.

THE BOATYARD IS BORN

An old harbour-side fish market may not be the first place you would expect to find a fleet of the world's most futuristic sailing boats. But with its long, hangar-like sheds, high roofs and close proximity to the sea, this most unexpected of locations feels like it was purpose-built with the Boatyard in mind.

The Boatyard concept was introduced for the 2014–15 edition of the Volvo Ocean Race. A shared service and repair facility, it was created to take care of the tuning, maintenance and repair work on the new one-design Volvo Ocean 65 boats that were competing in the race for the first time. In fact, it was the introduction of the new one-design boats that made the Boatyard concept possible – if the boats could share the same design solution, why couldn't they share the same service facility as well?

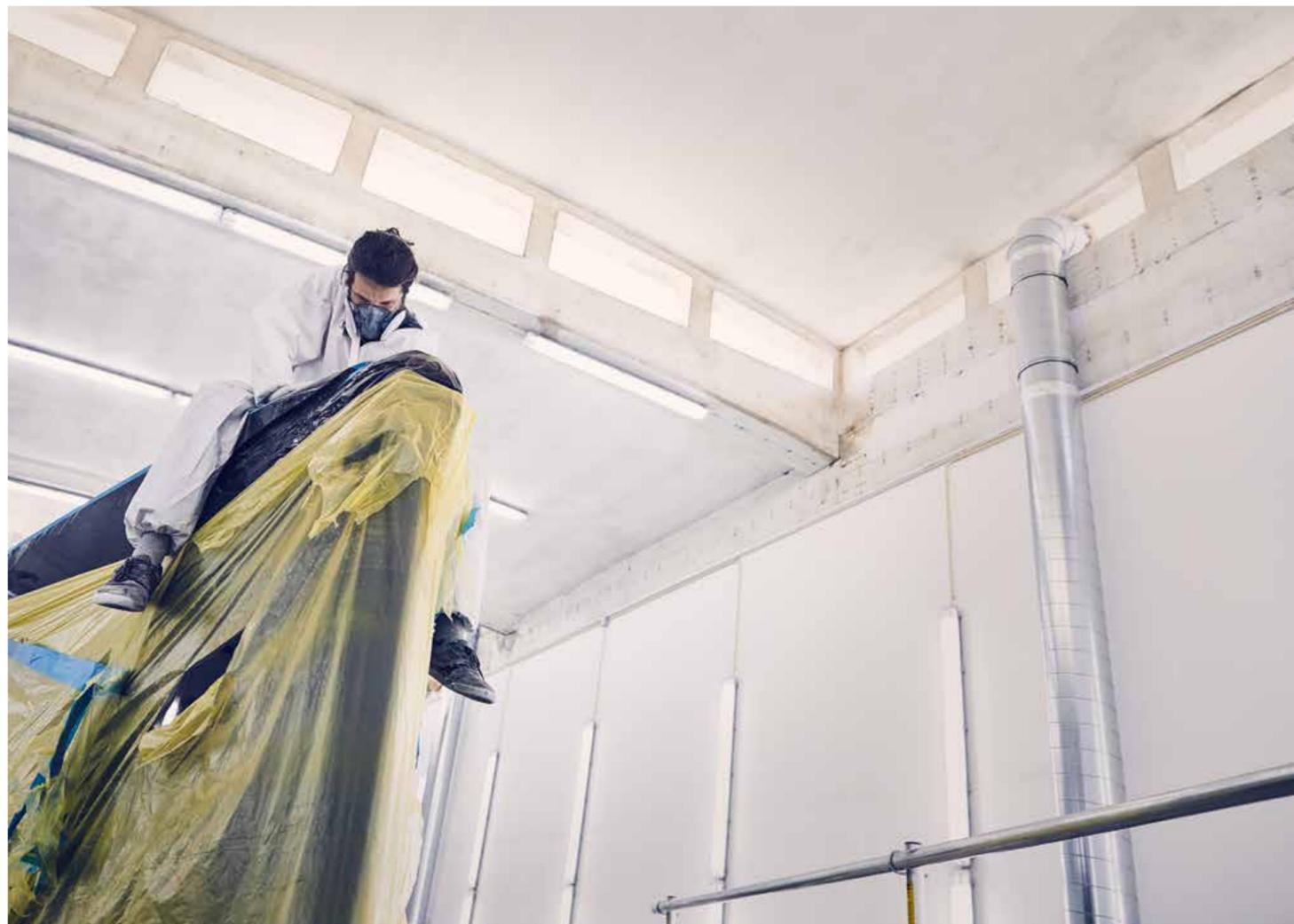
"The one-design system enabled us to set up a defined series of protocols as to how the boats should be serviced," explains Neil Cox, who works as Refit Manager at the Boatyard. "And because the boats are identical, it's easier to stock the parts we need. It's actually allowed us to set up a service environment that's similar to how you would service a car. The customer drops it off and when they pick it up again they know it's been serviced to the highest possible standards."

SERVICE THE VOLVO WAY

The way a boat is serviced at the Boatyard is very similar to the way your Volvo is serviced at your Volvo dealer. Admittedly, the logistics are a little more complex – okay, a lot more complex – but the principle is the same.

Each team competing in the race is allocated a specific date to drop their boat off at the Boatyard. On the same day the boat is dropped off, it is hauled out of the water, placed on a low cradle and rolled into the first shed. As soon as a boat enters the first shed, an intense 15-week cycle of activity begins for the Boatyard team.

The Boatyard team consists of 30 core members, with a skillset that includes boat makers, sail makers, electricians, engineers, communications experts and much more. The team members come from all over the world and each one is an expert in their field with previous experience of the Volvo Ocean Race. For each boat that enters the Boatyard, the team has only 15 weeks to repair and refit it to exactly the same standards and specifications as when it was first built.



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NEIL COX, REFIT MANAGER AT THE BOATYARD

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Repairing and refitting a single boat to the required specifications in just 15 weeks is quite a challenge. But the Boatyard team doesn't have to complete just one boat, this year they have to complete eight – all of which must be delivered on time and be identical in every way. During the most intense phase of the refit, the team will find themselves working on as many as five different boats at once, all of which will be at different stages of the refit procedure. It may sound daunting, but for the Boatyard team it's all in a day's work.

One person who knows all about the challenges the team can face during a refit is Refit Manager, Neil Cox. "At times it can feel overwhelming – much like the race itself," says Neil. "But before long, the team pulls together and we're back on course."

Originally from Sydney, Australia, Neil is a boat builder by trade and for years divided his working life between the America's Cup and the Volvo Ocean Race – or the Whitbread, as it was then known. But in the end, Neil's passion for offshore sailing led to him focusing solely on the Volvo Ocean Race, which he's now been involved with for 18 years. So, what does Neil believe the Boatyard gives to the sailors?

"Our job is to give the sailors confidence in their boat. At the end of the day, these guys are not just a short row to shore. They're racing. So, we have to be able to give them the confidence to know their boat can be pushed to its limits."

But how do the Boatyard team achieve their goal of delivering an identical fleet of boats that will bring confidence – and hopefully victory – to the teams in such a short time?

A PASSION PROJECT

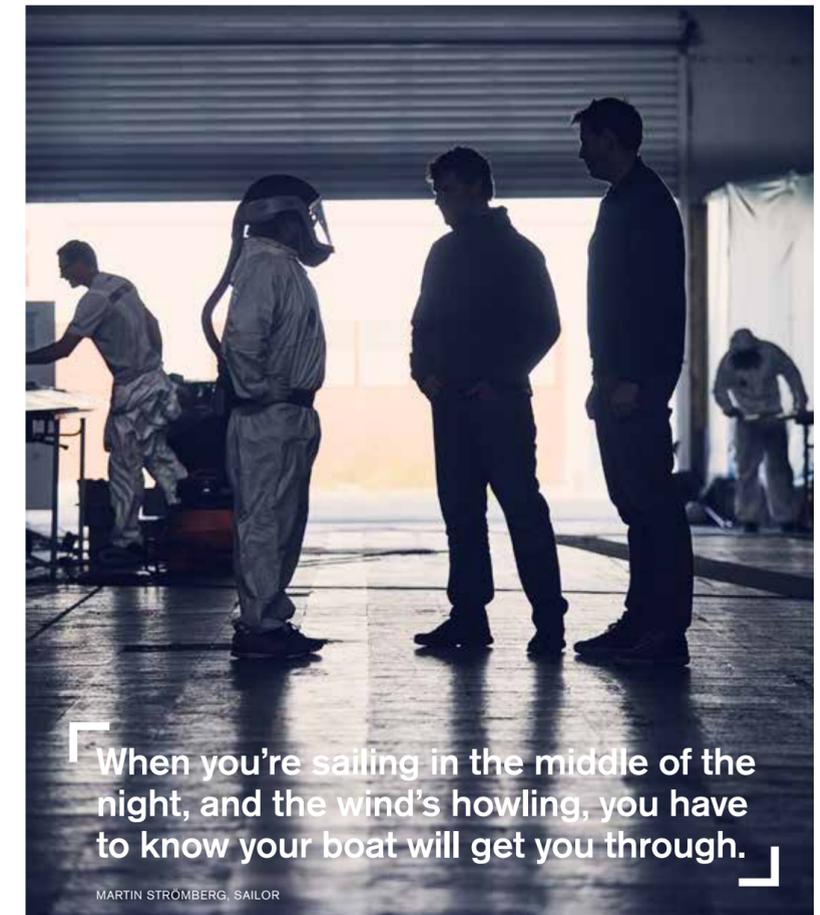
The refit project has an extremely tight schedule and there are a series of milestones that have to be

reached along the way in order for it to be completed on time. But the Boatyard isn't regimented. Instead, the team is disciplined, responsible and proud – and that's why it works so well. "The fact that this team has hit the deadline every time is a testament to their commitment to the project," says Neil. "They know beforehand the challenges they face and they are more than up for the challenge."

With a refit time of just a few months per boat, every stage of the operation has to be meticulously planned. To help maximise what little time they have, the 15-week cycles are divided up into five different stages, each of which lasts three weeks, with a different team responsible for the work on each stage. "Everyone works in teams. But they don't need to be micro-managed in any way. They have the expertise, they know their responsibilities and they know that every 3 weeks a certain level of work has to be completed for the boats to move onto the next stage – catching up later isn't an option," says Neil.

The first stage of the refit deals with detecting, diagnosing and taking care of repairs. When the boats are delivered to the Boatyard, they arrive with a detailed list of repairs that must be carried out over and above the standard maintenance work. At this point, the teams also get the chance to meet the experts who will carry out the actual work on their boat and discuss the refit procedure face-to-face. An ultrasound is then carried out on the boat to make sure no faults are lying undetected beneath the surface. Once the diagnosis is complete, everything is removed from the boat until it is nothing more than a carbon shell.

"The hydraulics come out, the deck hardware comes off, all the electrical components come out, the plumbing comes out – there is literally nothing left," says Neil. "Once everything has been removed, it is carefully labelled and stored. Then, the repair



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MARTIN STRÖMBERG, SAILOR

work can begin." Even though the vast majority of repairs are carried out on-site, some components are sent back to their original manufacturer.

But such is the level of expertise among the team, there's not a single component that they couldn't take care of themselves if the circumstances demanded it.

THE OCEAN SPRAY

Once the repair stage is completed, the boat moves on to stage two – the one-design spray booth. Now, usually, we think of painting as something that is reserved for last, something to add a finishing touch to a project. But here, it's different. Here, there is an element of paintwork which must be completed before the rest of the refit work can begin. For example, the hull must be painted safety orange and several coats of one-design gloss must be applied where all the deck hardware will go. But it's in stage three where everything really starts to come together again.

"The refit bay is where the boats become Volvo Ocean 65 boats again," says Neil. "By this time, every piece of hardware that was stripped out during stage one six weeks ago has been serviced, reassembled and tested, either by the manufacturer or by us, and is now ready to be refitted. So, at the end of week nine, apart from the rudders, mast and keel, you almost have a complete boat again."

THE FINAL LEG

The next three weeks are spent in the branding bay where the boats are first weighed and then branded.

It's the weight measured here that becomes the boat's official weight. This sets the parameters for the whole fleet, i.e. which is the lightest boat and which is the heaviest. These weights are then used when it comes to ballasting the boats for the start of the race. Once the boat has been weighed, the branding begins. Branding the boat with its team colours and logos is a complicated process, which takes over a month to plan and three weeks to complete.

Once the boat has been fully branded, it enters the final leg of the refit – the commissioning period. The commissioning period allows the team to take the boat out of the shed and start fitting the communication equipment, such as the antennae towers. The boat is then picked up by a crane and attached to the keel, where it will remain for two days while the steering systems are set up, the rudders fitted and everything else needed to launch the boat is put in place. The following week, the rigging is fitted and the boat is launched.

The first two days in the water are spent carrying out a series of tests, e.g. the hydraulics, electronics and the keel, so the team knows for certain that the boat is ready to sail.

Then, halfway through this final three-week period, the sailing team shows up to collect their boat. It's testament to the expertise of the Boatyard team that they've never needed more than two days of sea trials to know that the boat was ready for the teams to take away and test for themselves. For the final week of the refit, the teams get the chance to reacquaint



and given a complete service. These services are extremely labour-intensive – especially when you are carrying out eight services over a 10-day period. So, again, time management is crucial and everything is documented and logged."

TRANSPARENCY IS KEY

Initially, the one-design boats were introduced to the Volvo Ocean Race to create a level playing field that rewarded skill and teamwork more than technology and building prowess. And this has resulted in a greater degree of transparency which is evident in the workings of the Boatyard. "We operate an open-book policy at the Boatyard," says Neil, matter-of-factly yet proudly.

"Once upon a time, teams had huge shore crews which were open to their own interpretation of the rules. So, of course, back then there was an element of secrecy. But that no longer exists. Now, the same technicians work on all the boats and everyone gets the same high level of service and care. Our only loyalty is to the race itself."

THE VIEW FROM THE DECK

But what about the people who will call these boats home over the next eight months – the sailors themselves? What is the most important thing the Boatyard gives them? We asked three-time Volvo Ocean Race veteran and former winner, Martin Strömberg, what he needs from the Boatyard to help him perform at his best.

"In the Volvo Ocean Race, you have to be able to trust the boat. So, the most important thing the Boatyard gives me as a sailor is peace of mind."

Swedish sailor and former Volvo Ocean Race winner, Martin Strömberg, visits the Boatyard to check out the team's expertise first-hand.



Hailing from Volvo Cars' hometown, Martin knows how important it is to have something sturdy and reliable between you and the hidden dangers of the deep blue sea.

"When you're out there sailing in the middle of the night, and it's pitch black with the wind howling around you, you have to know your boat will get you through. You have to know the boat is safe. Luckily, I can trust that the Boatyard has done the job they need to do and that the boat we get from them is 100%," says Martin.

There can be no higher compliment paid to your knowledge and expertise than someone who is willing to, quite literally, put their life in your hands. But that is exactly what sailors like Martin do every time they take on the human challenge of the Volvo Ocean Race – they put their lives in the hand of the Boatyard.

So how does Neil feel about this? "When a boat is handed back, we hand it back with confidence. And we hope the teams feel the same level of confidence as us," he answers. I don't think there can be any doubt that they do. ■

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themselves with their boat safe in the knowledge that the Boatyard staff are on hand to help out should any problems arise. At the end of week 15, the boat is signed over to the competing team. Then, everyone at the Boatyard turns their attention to the next boat in line, until all boats competing in the race have been refitted and are ready to set sail.

THE BOATYARD SETS SAIL

But for the Boatyard team, the work doesn't stop simply because the refit procedure is over. Once all the refits have been successfully completed, what Neil calls "the travelling circus" begins. The "travelling circus" is effectively two mobile versions of the boatyard which follow the race around the world, leapfrogging each other for maximum efficiency. The mobile Boatyards function like racing car pit stops, where the amount of service work required depends on how demanding the previous leg of the race had been.

"There are three degrees of service we can carry out at each stop – AAA, AA and an A," explains Neil. "Sometimes the boats don't come out of the water, so that limits the amount of work we can do. But other times the boats are lifted out of the water



THE ESSENCE OF
ELEGANCE

Volvo Cars' first watch is a sophisticated and beautiful timepiece that combines unique decorative touches with elements of modern Nordic design. It's meticulously engineered for reliability and aesthetic appeal, with confident, minimal detailing. The design also incorporates premium natural materials, like the high-quality Swedish leather of the strap. These elements go into a watch that is elegant, useful and distinctly Scandinavian.

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