

FROM AFRICA TO THE WORLD

Built in South Africa by Robertson and Caine, Leopard's power and sailing catamarans are as tough as the seas they cross, and available around the globe through the world's biggest charter companies.

WORDS **JOHN HIGGINSON** PHOTOS **LEOPARD CATAMARANS / NAUTIQUE**

*Leopard 53 PC, 46 PC, 40 PC,
50, 45 and 42 in Cape Town
overlooked by Table Mountain*



Robertson and Caine employs 2,400 staff in multiple production sites across Cape Town in South Africa's Western Cape province

don't think I've ever seen so much dancing – or any dancing, in fact – during a shipyard visit. However, during our tour of Robertson and Caine's half-a-dozen facilities around Cape Town, I frequently see factory workers grooving, singing and laughing, whether it's while carrying a sanded piece of wood or having just downed tools for a well-earned tea break.

The vibe is contagious. It's an 'all hands on deck' atmosphere and everyone seems happy to contribute to the cause, dedicated to producing Leopard catamarans for the rest of the world to enjoy.

Along with French brands Lagoon and Fountaine Pajot, Leopard is one of the 'big three' in the world of pleasure sailing and power catamarans. Now employing 2,400 staff, Robertson and Caine builds exclusively for Leopard Catamarans and its sister charter companies Sunsail and The Moorings, with all three companies under Travelopia and all models known internally as 'Leopards'.

Following a strong rebound from a Covid era that halted the global travel industry in its tracks and left a couple of charter competitors in its wake, Leopard looks set to remain at the catamaran sector's

Kit Chotithamaporn (white shirt), Leopard's Head of Asia, hosts Yacht Style and dealers during factory tours; a leopard; Ernie Els Wines in Stellenbosch



The Leopard 45, the company's best-selling catamaran to date, is produced at Robertson and Caine's Bolt Avenue facility

top table as it continues to produce well over 200 catamarans a year, shipped all around the globe from South Florida to the south of France, Singapore to Sydney.

Yacht Style witnessed the production of all six Leopard models and their charter-specific versions during a head-spinning tour for some of the brand's Asian dealers in Cape Town, South Africa's oldest city, and in other parts of the Western Cape province.

Just factory tours? No chance. There were visits to the Royal Cape Yacht Club and Cape Grace Marina, and cruises on Leopard powercats down the coast to Clifton, one of several activities and drives offering views of the iconic Table Mountain overlooking the city.

The fun dialled up with an overnight safari at Inverdoorn Private Game Reserve to see lions, elephants, giraffes, zebras, cheetahs and, you guessed it, leopards. How to break up the drive back to Cape Town? A pleasant stop at the Ernie Els Wine Estate near Stellenbosch.

Seen it all? No chance. There's a stunning drive south to the Cape of Good Hope to see penguins at Cape Point. Penguins are not the first animal that comes to mind when you think about Africa, but they're presence is not that surprising when you look south and realise the next stop is Antarctica.

Throw in a return trip along Chapman's Peak Drive with views of Hout Bay, as well as lunches and dinners filled with seafood, steak and wine, and it's a tough place to leave. This is the world of Leopard, at least for a few days for a few lucky visitors.

CATS RISE IN POPULARITY

While the Western Cape offers an enjoyable lifestyle for some and is a tourist hot spot, unemployment is a huge issue, which is why labour-intensive industries like boatbuilding are much needed.

In fact, Robertson and Caine is not alone in South Africa and is among dozens of first-class boatbuilders of varying size across the country. However, it's by far the country's biggest and remains the southern hemisphere's largest catamaran builder.

In fact, it's the global leader in inboard power catamarans, with a fleet focused on strong, powerful flybridge powercats. Leopard is currently producing its fourth generation of powercats – the all-new 40 PC, 46 PC and 53 PC – alongside a trio of sailing catamarans, the 42, 45 and 50.

It all started when Lex Raas, a South African boatbuilder, followed eight years with Beneteau in France and the US by joining The Moorings in 1994, later becoming CEO and overseeing the merger with Sunsail. Early on, Raas saw the vast potential of catamarans so asked John Robertson and the late Jerry Caine if they could build specifically-designed sailing cats for the Caribbean charter market.

Founded in the Cape Town suburb of Woodstock in 1991, Robertson and Caine produced 100 catamarans for The Moorings in just four years. Each made its way to its destination on its own hull, showing that these cats, initially tested and sea-trialled in the rough seas off Cape Town, were built to last and could handle ocean conditions.

Located in the north of Cape Town, the impressive Bolt Avenue site is the only Robertson and Caine facility with a testing pool





The vast joinery workshop is part of the combined facilities at Graph Avenue and Hoist Avenue, where the 42 and 46 PC are built

The popularity of the models led to sailors wanting to buy their own and in 1997 the Leopard brand was born with the launch of the original Leopard 45, with 69 units produced. Individuals could now customise layouts, choose optional gear, and select delivery locations for their own private use.

The 38, 47 and 42 sailing cats followed, selling about 200 units between them, before Leopard entered the powercat market in 2002 with the original 46 PC. By this time, John Robertson had relocated to Florida, to be closer to the brand's core market and where today his son Michael works for the company.

Leopard's 1,000th catamaran set sail by early 2012, firmly establishing the brand and Robertson and Caine's position in the catamaran market. Just over a decade later, the 2,513th Leopard catamaran was launched on November 14, 2022. Why was this date significant? It was the 70th birthday of John Robertson, who retired from the business the following year after selling to Vox Ventures.

The growth has been steady but noticeable. Dieter Roux, the shipyard's Service Manager, recalls annual production of about 80 units when he joined Robertson and Caine in 2007 and has seen that figure now rise to about 215 catamarans a year.

To date, Robertson and Caine has produced over 2,800 'Leopard' catamarans based on 26 models, with the first two-thirds or so cruising from Cape Town across seas and oceans to their delivery destinations, before shipping options proved feasible.

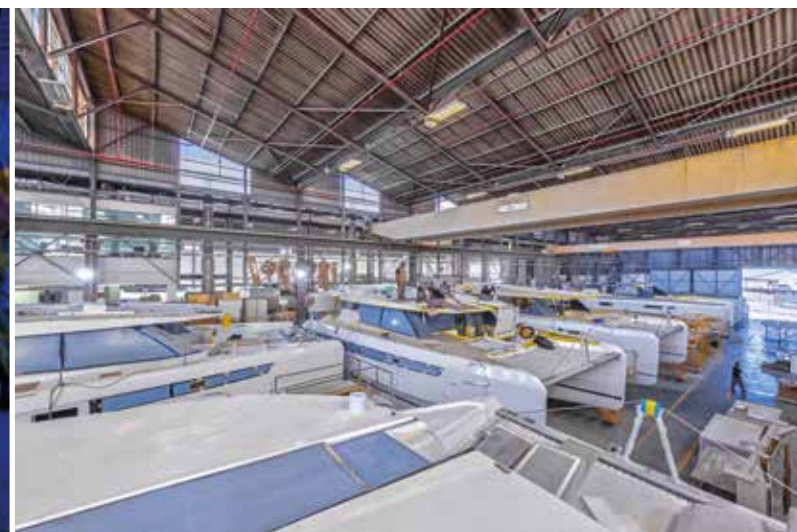
LEOPARD'S GROWING PAW PRINT

In terms of manpower and footprint, Robertson and Caine has a workforce size and spread of facilities comparable to the likes of British builders Sunseeker and Princess in Poole and Plymouth respectively, both on England's south coast.

It's a business model that differs to many yacht builders in Italy, for example, which rely on sub-contractors, and where the biggest



John Robertson, co-founder of Robertson & Caine, with Franck Bauguil, head of Travelopia's yachting business; Woodstock builds the 50 and 53 PC



Leopard hosts its Asia dealer meeting at this year's Singapore Yachting Festival, where it displayed the 42, 50, 40 PC, 46 PC and 53 PC



companies like Azimut-Benetti, Ferretti Group and Sanlorenzo have operations across multiple cities.

Robertson and Caine has a well-oiled network with seven sites headed by the Woodstock facility on Railway Street near Beach Road, where it produces the 50 and 53 PC, the flagships of the sailing and powercat lines respectively. Woodstock is also home to the in-house design team, as Leopard oversees all aspects of design while collaborating with Simonis Voogd Design on naval architecture.

Each year, Leopard produces about 25-30 units of the 53 Powercat, which passed the 100-unit mark in April 2024, four years after the model debuted at the Miami International Boat Show in 2020. It's an impressive demand for a model whose predecessor, the 51 PC, sold a stunning 137 units. The 53 PC is on a cycle of about 11 working days, while the 50 sail cat is on a six-day cycle.

To the northeast, the Neptune Street facility in Paarden Eiland includes the Leopard 40 PC assembly line, moulding shop and engineering department.

Further northeast is Bolt Avenue, the only site with a testing pool and dedicated to the Leopard 45, the company's best-selling model to date, with over 360 units. Nearby are the neighbouring Graph Avenue and Hoist Avenue facilities, home to the Leopard 42 and 46 PC assembly lines plus the large joinery workshop and CNC machines. The company is also making its own exterior and interior cushions at a new site.

Once catamarans are completed, they're trucked to the waterfront

for commissioning before awaiting shipping to destinations in six continents, with the US the foremost market and Asia typically receiving about 8-10 units a year.

Roughly half of Robertson and Caine's output are private Leopard catamarans, with the other half split between Sunsail and The Moorings, where they're available as part of enticing ownership programmes.

The ownership programmes for models within the Sunsail and The Moorings fleets include a charter programme of five to six years during which the yacht is managed and maintained at zero cost to the owner, who can use the yacht or others for up to 12 weeks of cruising – based on a 'points' system – at any of the charter companies' global destinations.

The Guaranteed Income package provides owners with a fixed monthly income – not dependent on charter activity – before the owner takes full ownership after completion of the programme.

Alternatively, Thailand is among selected markets offering Option to Purchase, where owners initially pay 45 per cent and once the programme is completed, can choose whether to pay another 20 per cent to own the yacht outright or take a guaranteed cash buyback of 20 per cent.

Both programmes offer stress-free ownership as well as financial benefits and savings, offering an enticing way to dip your paw into the alluring world of Leopard cats. ✎

www.leopardcatamarans.com



Leopard's all-new Powercat fleet, the 40 PC, 46 PC and 53 PC, cruise in formation in the Bahamas