

The call of THE WILD

Sietse Koopmans takes his explorer yacht *Zeepaard* on a global cruising adventure

Words | Alexandra Groom



Sietse Koopmans, owner of Zeelander Yachts, is explaining over lunch in the South of France why he feels so passionate about promoting the world of exploration cruising to the wider superyacht community.

"I have made around 3,400 flights in my life and have owned 17 companies around the world, but I always felt that I'd been everywhere and seen nothing. My travels were between my house, the airport, and various hotels and offices. Maybe the odd shopping mall. So I said to myself, 'One day I'm going to sell my company and sail round the world on a slow boat, and I want to see everything in slow motion'. So that's what I did. And it was spectacular."

Koopmans spent three years circumnavigating the globe on his 37-metre JFA explorer yacht *Zeepaard*, taking in the Mediterranean, Caribbean, cruising across to the Pacific Islands and then moving on to Australia and South East Asia, before crossing the Arabian Sea and finishing in Egypt. He can reel off an impressive list of numbers that defined the trip: three years and three months of travel, 39 countries visited, 50,000 miles sailed and over 40,000 photos snapped, but for him the biggest impact was emotional. "I did learn things from my trip. The first year I was on the boat I had tears in my eyes every day because I was so happy. I felt like I was released from prison," he explains of choosing to live life in the slow lane. "For those 12 months I tried to do absolutely nothing. But then after a year I started needing to be emotionally challenged, in the same way others feel the need to be physically challenged. So I

think it's important to find the balance between being too busy and having too much free time. That's one of the important lessons I learnt."

Koopmans tried to minimise his impact on the environment before he set off on his world cruise. "I changed all the lights on board to LEDs, which use less energy. I even changed the colour of the hull – she was dark blue, and that's very hot, it uses three times as much energy to cool a dark-hulled boat as opposed to a light-hulled boat. The maintenance is also a problem because it always looks dirty, so I painted her light grey."

For Koopmans, being properly prepared for a trip doesn't just involve the mechanics of a seaworthy boat. "Of course your boat needs to be suitable to travel, but you need to also think about where you're going and what the facilities are. You need to have proper refrigeration on board, because it can be hard to find fresh food and vegetables. Meat you can deal without and fish you can buy everywhere, but fresh vegetables are always a bit of a problem."

With the benefit of hindsight, Koopmans does have one particular part he would prepare more thoroughly for the next trip, and that is sending scouts ahead and involving more local guides. "You want to go to all the best places and not miss anything important. You go somewhere new and you feel like Columbus because you've never been before. But it's not the right way to

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Above: *Zeepaard* often had whole bays to herself on her travels.
Facing page, top left: Koopmans and his crew travelled to remote destinations.
Top right: Marine iguanas in the Galapagos are unfazed by humans...
Bottom left: ...as are the friendly seals.
Bottom right: A traditional boat in the San Blas Islands.



It's important to enjoy the travel possibilities afforded by yachts

explore for me, because when you come back and later read that they have volcanoes or amazing caves, you realise there are things you didn't see. So it's best you send someone ahead to explore the area or who knows where to go and what to see at what times. It's also important to organise proper dive guides. Diving is big in my family and I've rented many dive guides around the world, and they can really enhance the experience." Whereas some might argue this type of travelling is not exploring in the traditional sense, Koopmans shrugs it off. "When you decide to visit something under those parameters it's not necessarily an ad hoc decision, which does have a little romance to it I'll admit, but when your time is limited it's also very precious."

For owners like Koopmans the most important factor is to enjoy the experience of the travel possibilities afforded by their yacht. Whereas some enjoy the peace and the unknown, others prefer to be in the thick of the action. "When we had ocean crossings of more than four days, I would fly instead. I like doing things, and I didn't want to look at nothing for days at a time. And this is the way I went around the world. You send the boat from continent to continent and join it along the way. It was a very pleasurable experience."

Even after visiting 39 countries, Koopmans doesn't have a stand-out favourite. "It's very difficult to choose, because it depends on whether you like nature, culture or architecture. Even in the Mediterranean, there are so

many islands and diverse areas, there's so much of our own culture and history to learn of. You can spend ten years in the Med if you want to."

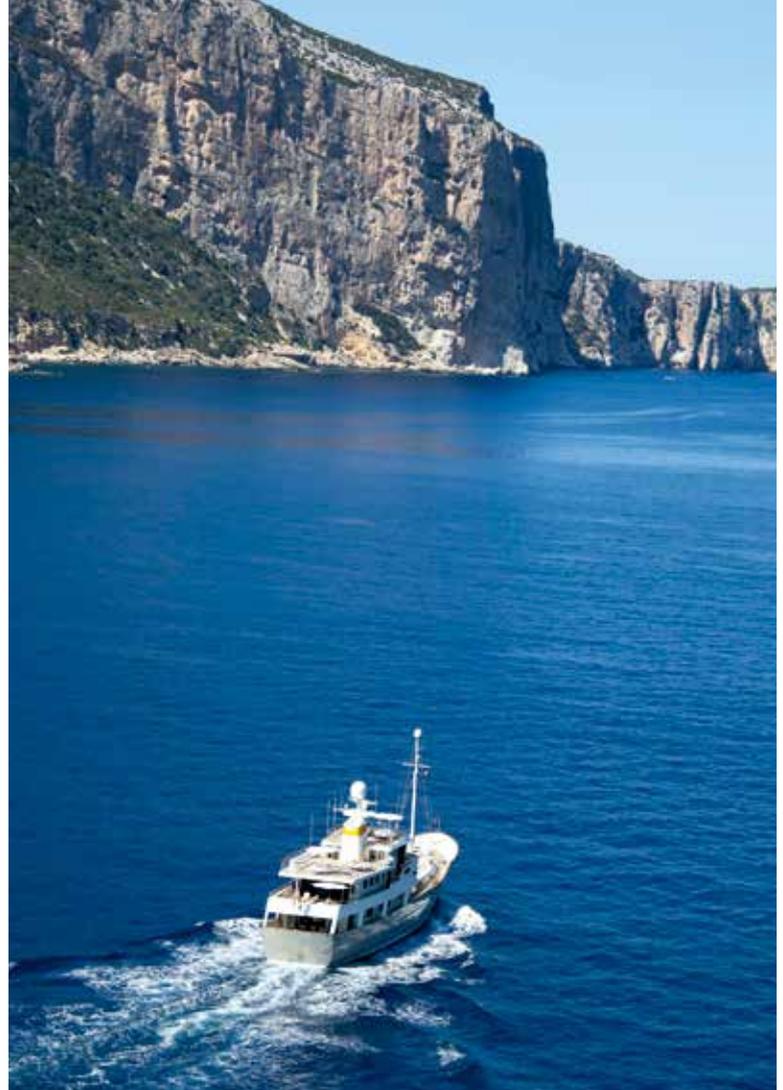
One of the places that Koopmans does speak very fondly of is the San Blas islands, off the coast of Panama. "They're spectacular. They look like something you'd see in National Geographic, but the most amazing part is the culture. The Kuna Yala people have been living the same way for centuries, with nothing, and they don't want anything. They're happy with the way they are, which is a very unique thing to see these days. I spent a couple weeks there – they're very open and friendly. One day I was with my personal trainer doing exercises on the sundeck, and they came floating next to the boat in a hollowed out tree, a mother, father and two children, watching me do my exercises and thinking 'look at that idiot, what is he doing?!' I was their entertainment! One night, our engineer was standing on the aft on the swim platform and this man came rowing towards the boat in his canoe. When he got close to the boat he grabbed a little plastic bag out of his canoe and gave it to the engineer and said 'Can you please charge my phone!' He had a little prepaid phone, but no electricity! He had a brother who lived on the mainland that he wanted to speak to!"

The Galápagos also left a lasting impression on Zeepaard and her guests, especially when two friendly seals decided to explore the engine room. "You have to ask permission to go to the Galápagos, and you can only anchor in one location or you have to pay very costly fees. Officially you also need to have yellow lights on your deck instead of white, because of the possibility

Top: Koopmans did not take any risks in the Arabian Sea and prepared Zeepaard accordingly.

Above left: Diving in Indonesia was a highlight for everyone. Above right: Koopmans travelled for the culture as well as the geography.





of migrating flies from one island to another at night. The diving is insane, because you're not allowed to fish there. The fish are intelligent and they know you can't catch them! They're very friendly, they come up to your mask and say hello. And the seals just swim around you while the marine iguanas sit on the black rocks to keep warm. You've got to be careful you don't step on one! At one point a school of about 30 hammerhead sharks came over us, 10 foot long! But they don't bother you."

The one place Koopmans wasn't going to take any risks was the Arabian Sea, going back to the Med via the Suez Canal. "I spent a lot of money keeping Zeepaard safe from pirates on that trip. We made extensive modifications, including wrapping her up in chicken fence, barbed wire and electric fencing. We placed the military number ZP01 on the bow to make her look like navy ship, fitted shooting bunkers on deck and modified the engineroom into a citadel from where we could operate all controls. I also had four Navy Seals on board with all their equipment. Luckily we didn't have any issues, and we encountered bad weather anyway which kept them away. Once a little boat approached, but then it turned around and that was it."

Of course, owners can choose not to take the yachts to certain locations if they would prefer. "The main drive I would say for a yacht is that you're free. You can go moor wherever you like, and that's your home. My friends and family visited me all over the world, and

wherever they came aboard, whether it was Ibiza or Cuba, Galápagos or Australia, they'd say 'Ah, nice to be back home.' That's the beauty of a yacht."

Asked if he would do it all again, Koopmans nods, although there are no immediate plans in place for an extended world journey, just pottering about closer to home. "It's something I can't explain. It's like water fever. If I'm not on my boat for more than two months I start to feel really funny. Its like an addiction, I need to be around water!"

As the founder and CEO of Zeelander Yachts, Koopmans has a perfect way to keep his passion burning. "Zeepaard is a fantastic yacht and very seaworthy, but I'm a perfectionist and I like to design, so I started designing a 50-metre which we are almost ready to build." The new yacht will take its cues from Zeepaard, with an emphasis on sustainability. "I included all the learning curves I had with Zeepaard, so there will be even more toys on board. There's a big trend towards looking after our environment, and I've made her as 'green' as possible. She will have diesel-electric propulsion and be very fuel efficient. She'll be very low maintenance and have artificial teak decks, of which you can't tell the difference, and will have very very low energy consumption overall," he explains.

"I don't feel I need to share my life story with the world, but I would like to share my exploration experience. When you say to people you are going around the world, most of them think of big waves and months of desolation, and so they don't undertake the journey. It doesn't have to be like that, and for me it was a very rewarding experience." **SYW**

Top left: The cosy interior of Zeepaard became a home away from home

Bottom left: The bridge deck affords ample relaxation space.

Above: Even if you never go further than the Med, there is lots to explore.

"The main drive with a yacht is that you're free to go where you like"