

CLASSIC DRIVER

The Imperia Vintage Yachts Meeting



Swapping Goodwood tweeds for reefer jacket and cap, I was lucky enough to be invited to join in the fun at the biennial meeting at Imperia on the Italian Riviera - the biggest event of its kind in the Mediterranean.

The comparisons with top-level historic motor racing are valid; a casual saunter along the harbour of Porto Maurizio reveals a watery 'paddock' every bit the equal of Pebble Beach or the Goodwood Revival. Substitute the Ferrari 250 GTOs for a Big Class Racing Cutter like 'Lulworth', all 120ft of polished brass, chrome, teak and mahogany, and you've got the picture.

For machines, read sailing boats; but both have the same thing in common, a design executed without considerations of cost for the wealthiest men of the day to give the fastest racing experience either on land or sea. And with both man-made creations, the results were pieces of great beauty, worth countless millions of the currency of your choice.



The reason luxury watch makers Panerai are involved in the series is because they, more than any other brand of chronometers, have been so involved with sailing and the sea since the late 19th Century when deck watches made by the company were used by the Italian Navy. The now familiar over-size timepieces with big winders and straps, and highly luminous markings, were a result of commissions made by the Navy's Submarine Group before and during WW2 with the requirements of high-visibility and complete water resistance at great depths. And of course like all luxury brands, it's nice to be associated with the world's most glamorous and desirable sports like polo, yacht racing and historic motorsport.

Over 100 wooden yachts were present at Imperia, all of them falling into two categories that I hope I can explain in a seaman-like fashion to you. The main principle is that all the boats are built before 31st December 1975, and that they are not 'production line' craft; they must be genuine commissions without interchangeable parts common to many other vessels. The 'Vintage Yachts' are those built prior to 31st December 1949, while 'Classic Yachts' are ones made after this date but before the later cut-off. In both classes you can enter a 'Replica' that, regardless of its launch date, meets the spirit and construction methods of the time.

Like any historic car racing meeting, pride of place in the 'paddock' goes to the most expensive and desirable entries - in this case it's the biggest, oldest and most beautiful craft, those like 'Lulworth' designed by Herbert W. White of White Brothers, Southampton and launched in 1919, or 'Mariquitta', designed by William Fife III of W. Fife and Son, Fairlie and launched in 1911 as a First International Rule 19 Metre Class contender.



Moored in harbour with sails furled, ropes stowed just so and an awning rigged for coffee and breakfast these big boats look good, but when you are able to observe them at first hand, from an accompanying motor cruiser and see them in full sail they are magnificent, one of the most wonderful sights imaginable. From a landsman's perspective I can neither describe the set of sail nor really understand the finer points of navigation, but as an image that stirs the blood it's right up there with a 250 Testa Rossa at Le Mans.

The weather ranged from so severe on the Friday that the emergency services were called out **inland**, to mild sailing on the Saturday and Sunday with a gentle breeze that probably did not stretch these yachts or sailors too much. But with a gala firework party on Saturday night and a tremendous spirit of friendly competition and camaraderie all weekend it probably didn't matter greatly.

Don't ask me who won, I'm sure it mattered to those concerned but for those spectators such as myself if ever 'taking part' rather than 'winning' was at issue, this was the time.

If you ever have the opportunity (and this year the series has put ashore in Antigua, Nantucket and Newport in addition to its regular Mediterranean dates), do check out the Panerai Classic Yachts Challenge - it's the most enjoyable weekend I've had for a long time, and (dare I say it) a refreshing break from petrol-related activities.

For further information on these wonderful classic wooden boats we suggest you visit www.lulworth.nl and www.fairlierestorations.com, a classic yacht restoration company based in the Hamble area, specialising in the yachts designed and built by William Fife.

Panerai make a limited edition (to just 500 units) version of their **Luminor 1950 Flyback** chronograph in celebration of their involvement with classic yacht racing. Called the '**Regatta**', it is priced at EURO 7,600 and features various detailing differences from the regular model. For further information please visit www.panerai.com

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