

The new superyacht must-have — a €250,000 inflatable beach club

Chartering a yacht just got a whole lot more fun. Caroline White on the big, bouncy accessories taking over the oceans (and Instagram)



Motor Yacht Loon, a luxury superyacht, with its sea pool out the back

Caroline White | Tuesday August 13 2024, 12.01am, The Times

A floating pickleball court has been baiting clicks in recent days, commissioned in China by the travel concierge service Via Croatia for the 44m charter yacht Aretha. It may be big, blue Instagram candy, but large-scale superyacht inflatables are serious business — and for good reason.

“On boats there’s a finite amount of space,” says John Courtney, managing director FunAir, a US-based superyacht inflatables specialist (but not responsible for the pickleball court). “With inflatables, for limited cost and time, you can add to that space.” Alfresco sea-level areas are particularly precious real estate on a superyacht — usually confined to the stern where tenders and toys are launched). You might get fold-out platforms at toe-dipping level as part of the gym or spa on a 70m, but that’s still not much splash when you’re splashing out £500,000 a week to be “on the water”.

Adding an inflatable water park to your yacht’s arsenal can temporarily supersize its oceanside space — it’s also a steal compared with actually buying a bigger boat (for which a million a metre is the maxim). Added to that, in the last decade the range of inflatables available has grown significantly more sophisticated than the once ubiquitous basic slide.

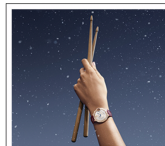


SYTT's vast waterpark

FunAir’s vast waterpark FunFlex is a case in point. The system of interlocking, interchangeable modules — including sea pools, climbing walls, jousting set-ups, jet ski docks and more — offers guests a different set-up every day, and it costs from \$2,500. The vast array of the company’s inflatables on the 68m motoryacht Loon, meanwhile, has helped to make it a staggeringly successful charter yacht — raking in \$13 million in 18 months, according to its broker (she’s for sale at \$47,500,000 with Merle Wood & Associates). In custom colours and with a yacht’s name emblazoned on top, this kind of kit can look surprisingly smart.

But blow-up gear can also solve real operational problems. A few years back FunAir was contacted by a superyacht captain whose tipsy charter guests kept jumping off the top deck — see the season two finale of *The White Lotus* for a vivid illustration of why this is a bad idea. Since the captain couldn’t stop them, he wanted to make it safe: cue Leap of Faith, an inflatable non-skid platform that sits over railings so guests can jump with enough clearance and grip to avoid hitting the boat on the way down. The company’s inflatable SeaStairs, meanwhile, address the problem of fluctuating swell when climbing from the sea or a jet ski on to a big boat — and have even been adapted for the RNLI. “They had a traditional method by which they could pull about one person out of the water in a minute,” Courtney says. “After we built this solution for them, they could pull 20 people out of the water [in that time].”





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A SYTT inflatable slide on Lady Jorgia

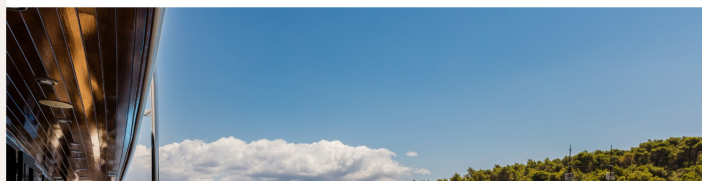
The inflatables arm of UK and Monaco-based Superyacht Tenders and Toys (SYTT) also builds high-spec custom sea pools and jet ski docks for the most illustrious yachts afloat (inflatable slides start at €5,000, while a fully equipped inflatable beach club can cost up to €250,000). Among the company's most arresting work is "probably the biggest swimming pool and inflatable raft in the world", says Peter Emmons, SYTT Technical Manager. It was built for the 80m superyacht support vessel *U-81*, owned by New Zealand's richest man, Graeme Hart. The 168 sq m platform is lifted out of the water in one piece by a gargantuan crane, to lay on the vast toy-storage deck.



Inflatable sea pools allow guests to "loungue by the pool" while out at sea

The company is also creating inflatable games decks that sit on board. It started when they had a call from the chief officer of Savannah — the seafoam-green, multi-award-winning 83.5m motoryacht that features a semi-submerged "Nemo Lounge" and charters from €1,200,000 per week with the brokerage house Edmiston. "They had a carbon-fibre court on the bow and he had this crazy idea — would it be possible to have one that packed down?" Emmons recalls. The answer was yes and the custom inflatable measuring 11m by 8.5m has sparked a trend among the very largest yachts. Most recently it popped up on new 112m Renaissance (which charters for \$3,000,000 per week with Burgess). "It's more economical, it's lighter. It's quick and simple to pack-away, and deckhands have thanked them for it," Emmons says.

This last point is crucial, because crew famously hate inflatables. In an environment that is kept neat, surgically clean and generally shipshape, a massive sea-salted hunk of PVC is an unwelcome guest. Related bugbears include taking staff off regular duties for laborious inflating and deflating, and jamming up a yacht's already limited storage.





The floating pickleball court off the charter yacht Aretha

Both companies have therefore focused plenty of R&D on making their designs crew-friendly. That includes simple but space-saving tweaks and lighter, more durable materials and replacing metal handholds with rope rings made of Dyneema. "It weighs a just fraction stainless steel, is ten times stronger and it's soft, so it won't scratch the yacht," Courtney says. Super-efficient pumps mean a waterpark can be set up in 10 to 40 minutes. They've even made their slides more slippery.

SYTT, meanwhile, has swapped out PVC for greener TPU in its rigid inflatable, teak-topped jet ski docks. "It has much better abrasion resistance and is 30 per cent lighter — which means we can make the docks 30 per cent bigger ..."

Emmons jokes. It's little wonder he's in good spirits. Demand is growing and as products continue to evolve, the market for superyacht inflatables looks increasingly, well, buoyant.

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