

Evolution on the river

Growing competition in the river cruise sector is pressurising designers to up on-board accommodation and entertainment standards. But, faced with heavy spatial restrictions, is there a limit to what shipyards can do? Patrick Janssens, CEO of **Shipyards De Hoop**, discusses the latest layout innovations and the impact of global warming on riverboat design.

There is little sign of a slowdown in the booming river cruise sector. According to CLIA's 2014 state-of-the-industry survey, an impressive 61% of travel agent clients are highly interested in river cruises; Viking has christened 16 new vessels already this year.

For the industry's long-term stakeholders, market expansion means more competition. Nowhere is this more true than in the much-coveted arena of vessel design.

"We've had a couple of years now where there've been 30-40 new ships entering the river cruise market each year. It's really becoming a fight to have the best ship," says Patrick Janssens, CEO of Shipyards De Hoop. "One of the key design trends we're seeing is the increased focus on luxury. People expect hotel-level standards on board river cruise vessels now."

This new focus is partly underpinned by the changing role of river cruise ships. Once primarily considered as a means of transport from one onshore entertainment area to another, these vessels are now expected to be leisure hotspots in their own right.

Consequently, the newest river cruise vessels have dramatically upgraded hospitality facilities in comparison with their predecessors. At Shipyards De Hoop, the traditional single restaurant and lounge design has been replaced by several eateries and bars, swimming pool areas, health plazas and fitness rooms.

Constraints breed creativity

However, while the competitive marketplace continues to push cruise lines towards increasingly lavish entertainment and guest accommodation, designing river vessels capable of fitting everything in is becoming a major challenge for shipyards.

"River cruise vessels have a limited size: there are the locks and bridges to consider, as well as the river rules and the classification," Janssens explains. "The spatial limitations present designers with an interesting puzzle; you end up designing rooms with more than one purpose."

"In the last two ships Shipyards De Hoop delivered, we had a swimming pool area that converted into a cinema in the evening at the push of a button, and it was also used as a fine-dining area."

The growing focus on luxury river cruises is especially apparent in the development of the Austrian firm Lüftner Cruise's designs – they've been a Shipyards De Hoop client for more than 15 years, so Janssens has witnessed the evolution from "small cabins, tiny TVs and single-wall systems to double-wall systems and large hotel-style cabins". De Hoop is currently constructing its 11th Lüftner ship.



The final frontier: Shipyards De Hoop's designers have had to get creative to solve the puzzles posed by space constraints on river cruise vessels.

Highs and lows

Shipyards de Hoop's engineering department is relatively large – it builds seagoing and inland boats. Rather than working from standard designs as many shipyards do, it is able to create original layouts. This approach means the yard can factor important new information on climate change into its vessel construction processes.

"One of the consequences of global warming on the rivers is that the low water gets lower and the high water gets higher," Janssens says.

"If you build light ships with hydrodynamically optimised hull shapes, you'll have quite a shallow-draught vessel that can continue to sail in low water levels. The competition, meanwhile, will have to stop. The design also saves on fuel."

"When there are high water levels, we've also made the ships semi-submersible – they can be ballasted down to extremely low air-draughts," he adds.

Shipyards De Hoop's innovative approach does, however, also often mean its designs are copied by rivals. Yet despite this frustration, Janssens remains proud of his firm's strategy.

"We'd rather invest in developing new ideas than protecting what we've done in the past," he says.

"We really try to achieve the best quality and a very high level of finishing in our work. That, along with cost-effectiveness, is the race you have to win in this industry." ■

Further information

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