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# A brace of Swans

When Sparkman & Stephens met Finnish builders Nautor's Swan in the early 1970's the result was an all-time yachting classic. A surprised **Karen Eriksen** finds two examples on Sydney Harbour.

“Look, there's a boat like *Bella Gioia*!” Almost not trusting our eyes, my husband John and I stare out of the Balmain boatshed's window at the boat below. What are the chances that two 30-year old classics, rare boats of which only 50 were built in Finland in the early seventies, end up on the same part of Sydney Harbour?

It definitely is a Swan 40, blue, not white as our *Bella Gioia*, but the same beautiful lines. So we ring the doorbell of the house above the boat and a friendship begins.

Build number 23 and 26, what fun! David Saunders has owned *Byzance* for 23 years and he and his wife Jenny are as passionate about her as we are about *Bella Gioia*. Not only have

we all the same tastes in boats, we discover other similarities. The Saunders are late parents as we are, and also own a poodle cross puppy. We have a Labradoodle called Pauli, they a Schnoodle named Tiger.

*Bella Gioia* and *Byzance* are clearly S&S designs but very few people recognise them as Swans. Their non-sloped cabin shape is atypical and they don't have the blue Swan stripes on the cabin, no double cockpit or bridge deck companionway. All that came later at Nautor's. The two are extraordinarily seaworthy boats, but weren't considered fast in their time. An old Nautor technician tells me: “They were still trying out fibreglass when those were built, they poured tons of the stuff into them. The

**Above:** Small cockpits were the order of the day in the design houses of the early 1970's.

**Opposite:** Two of a kind... the waters of Sydney Harbour provide a new playground for both well-travelled yachts.



40s were not known to be particularly quick boats."

**The rumour goes**

Nevertheless Superman Christopher Reeves used to own one, the rumour goes. Like most Swans our two are world travellers and both their histories include some quirky features. Asked what he likes best about *Byzance* David Saunders says: "She is an extraordinarily good looking boat. And she has never given me a fright."

Finnish luxury boat builders Nautor are renowned for their craftsmanship and quality of build. Their boats are considered the Rolls Royce of mass production yachts. But the beginnings of the boat yard in the late 1960's were humble.

Pekka Koskenkylae, the sales manager of a Finnish paper mill, started to build himself a boat that looked so good somebody convinced him to sell it before completion. That's how Koskenkylae got into boat production, step by

**"To get the Indonesian cruising permit they took part in the Darwin-Ambon regatta."**

step. In a brave and brilliant move he approached top yacht designers Sparkman & Stephens in New York.

In late summer 1966 in Helsinki's Palace Hotel near the ferry terminal Rod Stephens handed him design number 1710 of the Danish boat *Diana*, that had just won the One-Ton Cup. One of the first Swan 36's built to this design spectacularly won Cowes Week (six starts, six firsts) and made the tiny Finnish boat yard famous. Nautor then launched a Swan 43, and soon developed a whole range, one of which was the Swan 40. Some 51 boats were built from 1970-72.



The original radio fitout sits comfortably with the more modern equipment of today on *Bella Gioia*.

ANDREA FRANCOLINI



Comfort and strength make a happy marriage below decks on *Bella*.

ANDREA FRANCOLINI



Looking forward, *Bella Gioia* is a mass of polished wood and neat trim finishes.

ANDREA FRANCOLINI

### Beautiful girl

*Bella Gioia*, as her name indicates, has spent most of her life in Italy. The “beautiful girl” or “beautiful little thing” (the second part being pronounced “joya”) was built in 1972 and started out as the more masculine *Chaplin*. Signore Novi, president of the prestigious Yacht Club Italiano in Genoa owned her for just one year and sold her on to Gilberto Preterossi, a self made man who earned his money in shoe manufacturing. He was also one of the few Nautor clients who could speak fluent Finnish.

Preterossi sold the boat to the Masci family in 1976 after racing her in the Adriatic Sea. He then bought one of the first Swan 47s.

Filippo Masci, 42, reminisces: “When my father purchased *Bella Gioia* I was 16 and we raced and cruised the Adriatic. After I sailed around the world in 1979 I started to skipper the boat myself, and when I was 20 my brothers Mario and Giovanni, my sister Emilia, myself and many friends from Milan and Rome cruised the Greek islands, Sardinia,

Corsica, Tunisia and Spain.”

In summers *Bella* sailed to Greece from Portofino in Northern Italy, approximately 2000 miles. “Later for work-related reasons we sailed a lot less,” Masci said. “We kept the boat in Rhodes, Greece for three years and in Kusadasi, Turkey for two years. When I was young we used to have a lot of parties on board *BG*, and had a few love stories.” Even some future Italian sailing superstars were amongst the *Bella Gioia* crowd then. “Our friends who sailed with us in our twenties included Vittorio and Enrico Malingri and Giovanni Soldini,” he adds.

*Bella Gioia* even entertained famous pop stars. “In Rhodes, we won the Lindos Cup, a small fun regattas open to all yachts and dinghies. After the regatta we had the honour to have two members of the Pink Floyd group on board, Roger Waters and the drummer.” *Bella* also obtained a sponsorship from the famous AC Milan football club “and it was funny watching the boat surrounded by football fans and many flags and logos of the team.”

### Offshore regattas

*Bella's* racing was restricted to offshore regattas then. Before selling the boat Filippo Masci sailed a double-handed transAdriatic race from Italy to Croatia with his daughter Valeria, at that time 7 year old. “Of course Valeria became the most popular sailor of the fleet.” But her wild Italian days are over. and *Bella Gioia* is a Sydney family boat now.

When I bought her in Pescara, Italy in 1998 she was in good condition, with a newish teak deck and recent sails. I had always wanted exactly that boat, a Swan 40 from 1972. Friends of mine from Hamburg had one in the eighties and I immediately fell in love with her. So when *Bella Gioia* was advertised in *Yachting World* there was no hesitating. My mother said “now she has gone completely mad, to buy such an old boat,” but my father calmed her down and assured her of the virtues of timeless S&S designs and Nautor quality. The first family holiday on *Bella* was a most memorable one-week trip in early March for my dad’s 65th birthday. Driving from Rome to



Byzance has travelled the world with owner David Saunders and family.

Pescara over the Abruzzi mountains behind a snow plough let us doubt our sanity for sure. But sailing in brilliant sunshine with the snow-covered mountains as backdrop was spectacular despite the cold. We were the only yacht around, too.

*Bella*, me and friends had one sunny season in Corfu, Greece, then some friends sailed her to Sardinia for the Swan Worlds 2000. It had been a mammoth organisational extravaganza to mount this campaign. Friends from Germany who had never sailed together flew in two days before the first race, two girls and six guys. It ended up being the most exciting thing we had ever done, especially being on the starting line with a hundred other Swans. *Bella Gioia* was soon one of the better-known boats, not because of her excellent performance but her shaggy looks. Her yellow kite from 1972 was a remarkable sight, and it also raised some eyebrows in millionaire country that we lived on a 40-footer with eight people. No expensive Costa Smeralda accommodation paid by the owner, poor me.



“Their non-sloped cabin shape is atypical and they don't have the blue Swan stripes.”

#### Sail repairs

The sail repairs alone nearly killed my bank account. *Bella* had her own little jetty in Porto Cervo's old harbour that was littered with spare equipment as in the 40-plus gusts of the mistral uncountable things broke. (As a consequence the mighty *Bella* had a complete refit in Portugal the following winter. Enough embarrassment!) But we came 53rd out of a hundred Swans, not a bad result at all for my baby in such illustrious company, and we had a wonderful week.

In early 2001 John convinced me to have another go, this time at the Swan Europeans in Cowes, and organised *Loki* skipper Tony Kirby to come along. Ian Short built a fantastic new set of sails, we had a great crew - and the result was worse than the first time. Never mind, must have been the

stiffer competition, it was still great fun. After a West Country cruise in the UK and a winter on the dry in Cornwall in early 2002 we put *Bella Gioia* on a freighter to Sydney where she now happily bobs on her pontoon at Hunters Hill.

*Byzance* also fulfilled a longstanding dream. David Saunders, 55, didn't grow up sailing. Born and raised in London his parents had no connection to the sport, but his godfather owned a 72-foot ketch, a big boat at that time. “He went to the Caribbean on her when I was 13. We went to a slide show about the trip at his home and there were all these pictures of long-legged blondes, that's when I decided I wanted to buy a boat.”

He learned to sail while based in Hong Kong as a merchant banker in

Bella Gioia on the wind at the Swan European Championships at Cowes in 2001.



“After the regatta we had the honour to have two members of the Pink Floyd group on board.”

the Seventies and finally fulfilled his childhood dream in 1979, when he had a year off between jobs. “I had always wanted to buy a boat and sail it across the Atlantic,” David said. That year he flew from Hong Kong to the UK to look for a suitable boat when a Hong Kong friend phoned him and said: “You remember *Byzance*, the Swan, she is for sale here.” David reacted quickly: “Will you buy her for me, I’ll pay you when I get back.” And so it happened.

Her first owner, a Hong Kong civil servant had called her *Uin-ne-Mara*, Bird of the Sea, but when he sold her to a syndicate of three Frenchmen, they renamed her *Byzance*, the old name for Istanbul. It was a name which at the turn of the century was associated with great fun, even a bit of naughtiness as the red light capital of Europe. The name has caused some pronunciation problems in VHF

traffic, David laughs. In a Coffs Harbour race she was raised as *Byzance* and *Bee-zence*.

#### First race

David Saunders cringes at the thought of his first race on *Byzance* in Hong Kong. “The spinnaker went up upside down and we only had it drawing by the time we crossed the finishing line.” But at the end of the season they were beating 2-tonners. To finally achieve his Atlantic crossing David Saunders shipped *Byzance* to Charleston, South Carolina. Having competed in Antigua Race Week in 1980 he set out for England a few days before the start of the hurricane season with only a 16-year old as crew. The boy wasn’t inexperienced, though. He had crewed on a 70-footer from Europe to Oz. Two days into their trip *Byzance’s* steering cable broke and they had to hand steer the whole four weeks to

Falmouth, Cornwall. At the end of that year the Swan was on the dry in Littlehampton and David Saunders had to jump on a plane to Australia to start his new job.

Just before he left he met up with an old friend in the Royal Ocean Racing Club for a drink a Major with the British Army in Hong Kong. “We started drinking at 6pm and four, five hours later I had a flash, an alcoholic inspiration,” David said. “Why don’t you buggers sail my boat to Oz for me.”

The next morning the Major phoned David after having attended an Army Sailing Association meeting: “You have a deal!” The British Army had taken part in several round-the-world sailing events but in the Thatcher era funds for that kind of undertaking were cut. *Byzance’s* delivery was an ideal way of keeping the team together. And as it was International Women’s year they had a women aboard on each leg. The soldiers sailed from Portsmouth to Gibraltar to Cyprus to Bombay to Sri Lanka to Singapore to Sydney and changed crew every leg.

David Saunders took up residence in Wharf Road in Birchgrove and kept *Byzance* in front of his house. Ten

years later he found that he wasn't spending much time in Oz and wasn't using his boat enough. Maybe it would be a better idea to have her in Singapore or Hong Kong?

**Darwin-Ambon**

Two of his mates offered: "We will take it up there for you." To get the Indonesian cruising permit they took part in the Darwin-Ambon regatta, with David and Jenny joining the boat in Darwin. It was Jenny's first real sailing experience after only a few party sails on Sydney Harbour. In 1993 they cruised from Ambon to the Spice Islands.

By now, however, the Saunders' were spending more time in England than anywhere else and one night in Banda Neira decided to get her back to the Med, first do the King's Cup in Thailand and then the Swan Worlds in Sardinia in 1994. *Byzance* sailed from Phuket to Colombo to Aden to Cyprus, where David Saunders joined the crew. Then via Rhodes, Sicily to Sardinia.

The Saunders' didn't enjoy the Swan Cup that much. "Too many big boats, we never got back in time for the festivities." But *Byzance* came 33rd out of 80 boats, a great result.

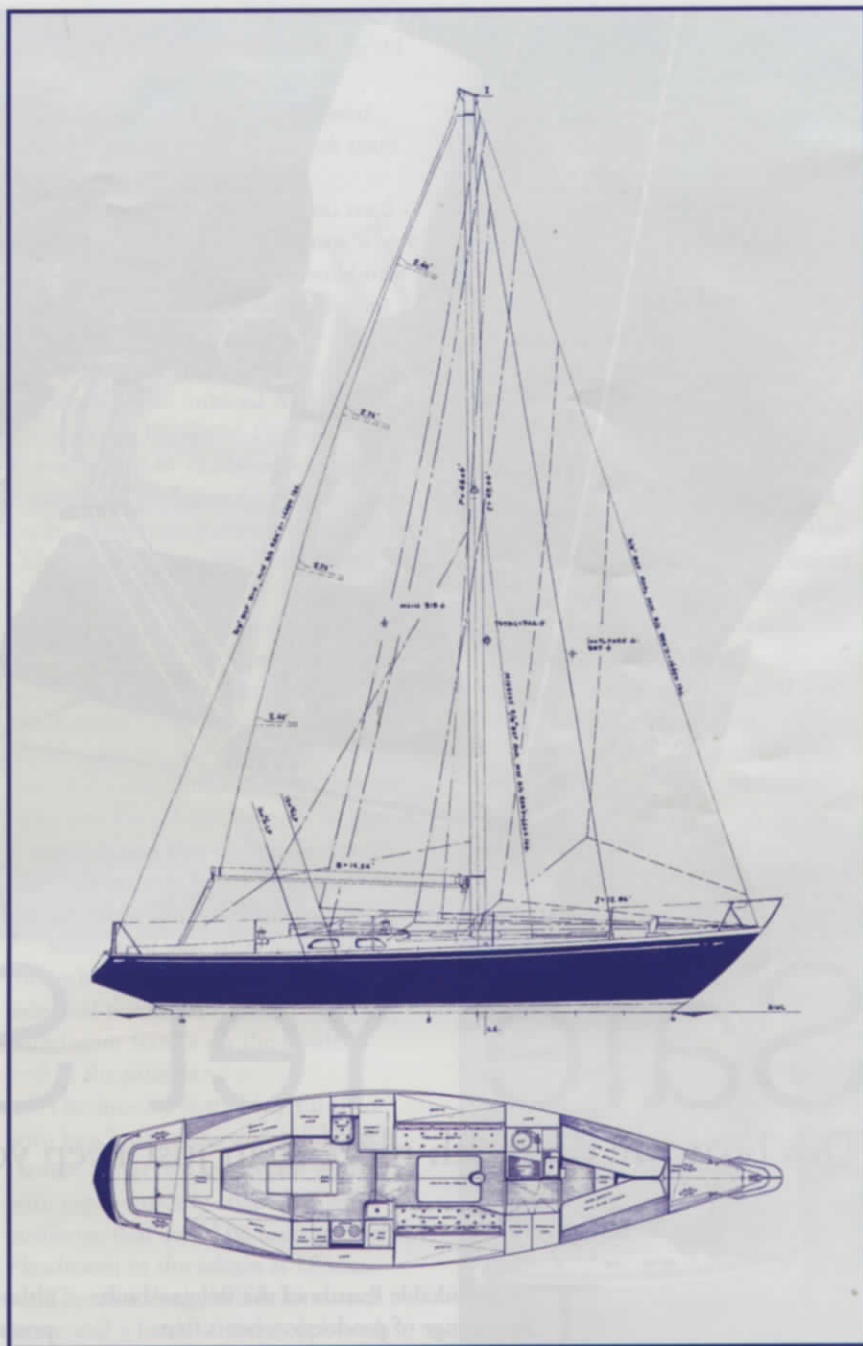
David Saunders had business in Cyprus at that time and *Byzance* slept there at a marina for two years, barely used due to lack of time. So in 1997 the Saunders' shipped her back to Sydney. Since then she has been used for family cruising and racing with the Balmain Sailing Club. In 1998 David Saunders, still commuting between continents as a venture capitalist, bought a 1981 Swan 51 designed by Frers to keep in Europe.

So David Saunders is only *Byzance's* third owner while *Bella Gioia* is on her fourth. Both boats have been repainted several times and their engines have been replaced.

**Third engine**

*Byzance* now has a Yanmar 23 hp after a Volvo 22 hp while *Bella* got her third engine in Portugal, a Volvo Penta MD2040 with 40 hp after the 22 hp Volvo wasn't worth repairing.

Various details are different. David replaced the old sliding front hatch



shortly after getting the boat. *Bella's* mast and boom are painted white but both boats have the same original Selden alloy rigs. *Bella* has new self-tailing Lewmar winches while *Byzance* has kept the original Barlows. The anchor winches are different and some running rigging tails to the cockpit.

*Bella* has two tone ash and teak down below and an original Danish "Sailor" radio, a big green box on the chart table. Otherwise they are twins right down to the identical bunk reading lights.

We are planning some twilight race co-ordination this season to match race

the two boats and maybe *Bella Gioia* and *Byzance* will go to the reef together the year after next. We would be ideal cruising companions.

**SPECIFICATIONS**

Length	11.98m
Beam	3.30m
Waterline	9.29m
Draft	2.05m
Displacement	8580 kg
Design date	1970
Launch date	1972